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## Why Are Our Regional Experts Expecting More War in Every Corner?



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“Kim Jong-un has made a strategic decision to go to war. The danger is already far beyond the routine warnings in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo about Pyongyang’s ‘provocations’.”

– Robert Carlin (former State Department analyst) and Siegfried S. Hecker (nuclear scientist and former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory), Stimson Center website 38 North, Discussion of North Korea attack against South Korea, January 11, 2024.

“It’s reached a very, very high level of tension. War could essentially happen anytime.”

– Lyle Goldstein, Director of Asia engagement at Defense Priorities, Discussion of Chinese attack against Taiwan.

“The implications of Putin’s victory in Ukraine...will only encourage more threats and more war, first in Europe and then in Asia.”

– Michael McFaul, professor at Stanford University and former ambassador to Russia, Substack, January 26, 2024.

“The world war potential is really, really significant.”

– Former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Michael Mullen, *New York Times*, January 30, 2024.

Nicholas Kristof, opinion columnist for the *New York Times*, asked last week if American anxiety about war can become self-fulfilling. I don’t believe so, but I do believe that the various experts, cited above, are irresponsibly anticipating an outbreak of war without any evidence to support such assertions. It must be emphasized that there is no hard evidence available for any of these lines of dangerous speculation that is available to those outside the intelligence community. Furthermore, they neglect the larger geopolitical picture that suggests various deterrents to the wars they are anticipating.

These “expert” opinions receive enormous attention in the mainstream media, however, particularly in the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. This certainly contributes to the anxiety of the American people. The irresponsible debate that is currently taking place regarding going to war against Iran adds to that anxiety, and puts a great deal of pressure on the Biden administration, already facing uncertain reelection prospects.

McFaul’s expectation of an expanded war with Russia is particularly unworthy. McFaul, an academic who was an ambassador to Russia for the Obama administration, confessed that he believed that Russian President Vladimir Putin “surely will be satiated if, God forbid, he succeeds in annexing more of Ukrainian territory.” But after a trip to Lithuania last week and meetings with government officials and regional experts, he shares their fears that “Putin is only getting started.” McFaul believes that Putin has “transformed Russia into a wartime economy,” and that there is a possibility of a “direct, conventional war between NATO and Russia.”

McFaul’s arguments would make some sense if it were not for the fact that Russia has done so poorly against the inadequately trained and supplied Ukrainian forces on its border. Putin’s military has failed in key conventional situations and, as a result, has been forced to withdraw from attacks on Kyiv, Kharkov, and Kherson. The long-term

prospects for Russia's economy are very weak, and Russia has gone hat in hand with Third World states such as Iran and North Korea for military weaponry.

Moscow's western border is studded with NATO members as well as a NATO organization that has significantly increased its military prowess. Over the past year, NATO has increased its military spending by nearly \$200 billion, which nearly equals Russia's annual defense budget. This argues strongly against Russia undertaking military action in the West against any of the 31 members of NATO.

The argument from Carlin and Hecker is particularly irresponsible because they have no way of knowing if North Korea's Kim Jong-un has reached a drop-dead decision to go to war, which would be suicidal in any event. Since Kim came to power in 2011, he has used his nuclear weapons program to attract attention from the West in order to engage in diplomatic negotiations. There is no reason to believe that the current test of his strategic inventory is any different at this stage. It is unlikely that Kim would make a decision to go to war without the approval of China, just as his grandfather sought the approval of Stalin and Mao before invading the South in 1950. The last thing that China's Xi Jinping would want right now would be a regional war between North and South Korea that would bring the United States and Japan into the war.

Germany's former ambassador to North Korea, Thomas Schafer, makes far more sense in arguing that Kim is resorting to a buildup of tensions in order to drive a hard bargain should Donald Trump return to the White House. This would, of course, be consistent with Pyongyang's past efforts to begin negotiations, which have involved cycles of threat and engagement. The United States has contributed to the tension by maintaining a policy of non-recognition of North Korea, which leaves little room for diplomacy and far too much room for reliance on military maneuvering. Many of North Korea's weapons tests have followed military exercises between the United States and South Korea.

Goldstein's anticipation of an imminent Chinese attack against Taiwan is also puzzling in view of the improved relations between President Joe Biden and Xi Jinping as well as the overall improvement of relations between Washington and Beijing. Ian Bremmer, founder of Eurasia Group, believes that the "biggest upside surprise of recent months has got to be the stabilization of U.S.-China relations." Military-to-military talks have resumed, and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has held private talks with China's top diplomat. Meanwhile, the mainstream media is predictably advocating the use of greater military force by the United States. In recent days, for example, the *Washington Post* has run lead editorials that were titled "North Korea goes from bad to much, much worse" and "The

U.S. needs to strike Iran, and make it smart.” The New York Times ran a long article (“A Worried NATO Prepares for a Russian Invasion”) that gives credibility to the idea that Putin “could invade a NATO nation over the coming decade” and that NATO “might have to face his forces without U.S. support.”

Have we forgotten so soon that it was the Bush administration’s misuse of military power against Iraq in 2003 that led to the chaos that now dominates the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. If ever there were a time for official Washington to take a deep breath and to consider the diplomatic options for dealing with Iran and North Korea as well as Russia and China, this is it.

*Melvin A. Goodman is a senior fellow at the Center for International Policy and a professor of government at Johns Hopkins University. A former CIA analyst, Goodman is the author of Failure of Intelligence: The Decline and Fall of the CIA and National Insecurity: The Cost of American Militarism, and A Whistleblower at the CIA. His most recent books are “American Carnage: The Wars of Donald Trump” (Opus Publishing, 2019) and “Containing the National Security State” (Opus Publishing, 2021). Goodman is the national security columnist for [counterpunch.org](http://counterpunch.org).*

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