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The Future of Conflict in the Korean Peninsula and Beyond: The War Dreams of Kim and Trump

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I'll let you be in my dreams if I can be in yours.— Bob Dylan, "Walking to World War III" (1963)

To anyone not serving in the American or Korean armies along the Korean Demilitarized Zone, the current talk of war and nuclear war is surreal and archaic, a throwback to an earlier and more dangerous era, a time when Bob Dylan sang about feeling lonesome and blue about walking into World War III with bad dreams in his head.

President Donald Trump's tweets that the United States is "locked and loaded"[1] and will fight North Korea with "fire and fury"[2] are matched by Kim Jong Un's inflammatory and outrageous rhetoric about nuclear threats — for example, that he might order his nuclear forces to conduct a "super-mighty pre-emptive strike" against the US and its allies any time they lift a finger against him or North Korea.[3] Even Trump's normally measured, senior adult supervisor, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis, referred on September 3 to the "total annihilation" of North Korea.[4]

Donald Trump's United Nations Speech threatening "to totally destroy North Korea" can be found here.

White House Chief of Staff James Kelly as Donald Trump speaks of North Korea at the UN

Both sides ratcheted up this rhetorical collision to extreme levels in late September, starting with Trump's extraordinary statement that the United States might "totally destroy" North Korea and mocking Kim Jong Un as "Rocketman" before the UN General Assembly on September 17, 2017.[5] Predictably, North Korea responded with cold ferocity. Four days later, Kim Jong Un read a personal statement addressed directly to Trump, declaring him to be a "mentally deranged" "dotard" and promising to respond in the most severe way with actions, not rhetoric.[6] Kim's statement read as a prelude to a declaration of war in the most literal sense.

Unsurprisingly, Kim Jong Un took Trump's reportedly improvised UN statement and threats[7] as a personal insult. In North Korea's

corporatist political culture, Kim embodies the entire North Korean nation and people. It virtually guarantees a North Korean response over the coming months and greatly elevates the risk of military confrontation between the United States and North Korea. Although the DPRK foreign minister referred ambiguously[8] on September 23, 2017 to a response in the form of a possible H-bomb test in the Pacific Ocean and the inevitability of North Korean missiles hitting the United States,[9] what is more likely is a massive a-symmetric attack, for example, cyberwarfare on critical infrastructure, against the United States, Japan, and South Korea, perhaps combined with a small-scale but substantial military incident designed to inflict substantial pain on the United States and its allied military forces, but not start a war. Obviously, such a riposte carries enormous risks of massive response from the United States.

Global stocks tanked after these symbolic clashes. Investors have been rattled by displays of military hardware. Fear and loathing are driving record sales of nuclear-war bunkers in US cities as far flung as Seattle, Honolulu and San Francisco. Wailing sirens during the last North Korean missile test sent thousands of Japanese racing to shelters.

Why is this flashback to the Cold War happening now? How realistic is this talk of war?

North Korea and the US are like conjoined twins born in the Korean War while attempting to kill each other. This was the first war fought by the US with its newly created National Security Council, leading to an enormous centralization of presidential power over how the American military fights its wars. The entire Cold War structure of American war-making was the direct result of fighting North Korea and, once it entered the Korean War, China, over three years of grinding and bloody ground war.

Although only created with Soviet backing in September 1948, the North Korean state system was forged under the conditions of total war from 1950 to 1953. With Soviet and Chinese backing, Kim Il Sung fought the American military to a stalemate, leading to the signing of the Korean Armistice on July 27, 1953.

The Korean War was also the first hot war in which the shadow of nuclear weapons from two nuclear-armed states fell over the battlefield — not just American nuclear threats aimed at China and the North Koreans; but also Soviet nuclear threats, which changed how the US Navy fielded its forces in Korean ports to avoid presenting a juicy nuclear target.

Ever since, the two militaries have confronted each other across the four-kilometer-wide Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), easily the most militarized place on earth. Like two black holes orbiting each other, each is the antithesis of the other's values, social structure and strategic goals. Should they ever collide again, the resulting conflict could light up the universe in a cataclysmic event. By the same token, unless both states change in some fundamental manner at the same time, neither can settle the seemingly endless conflict in Korea short of war.

Yet for all the threats by the two sides, the constant refrain is heard: war is not an option, even as some (including Trump himself) say that all options are on the table.

The fact is, as astute observers have noted, little out of the ordinary has been observed in North Korea's military deployments in 2017, even as missiles have been launched and a nuclear detonation caused the ground to rock all the way into China. Yes, the Korean People's Army went onto a war footing during pre-scheduled US-South Korea military exercises; but this is the norm during these annual exercises. The loudspeakers are blaring; but from a military perspective, all is quiet on the

northern side of the DMZ.[10] The situation is similar on the South Korean side of the DMZ. There is no logistical evidence that the US and South Korea are preparing to actually attack North Korea. Doing so would entail evacuating civilians as well as troop redeployments and commencing large-scale reinforcements and the pre-positioning of oil and other logistical needs. This cannot be done with deception; it will be obvious to the world if the US and its allies are preparing for a preventive war.

While war words continue to be hurled recklessly, this military bedrock at the DMZ appears as stable as ever. The reason is not far to see. The North Korean military moved the bulk of its offensive fighting forces south and positioned them right along the DMZ nearly five decades ago, because it could not hope to win a protracted war. This force includes hundreds of long-range artillery and rockets able to strike Seoul's northern suburbs and inflict many tens of thousands of casualties in the first few days of a war until South Korean and American air and ground forces could suppress the attacking force.[11] North Korea also fields missiles able to hit ports, reactors, airfields and cities, as well as US forces, as far south as Jeju, and even in Japan.

This North Korean conventional force was commonly thought to be deteriorating over the last two decades. But in 2016, the Korean People's Army began to deploy a new 300mm precision-guided multiple rocket launcher with a much longer range that could hit all of Seoul and other cities further south with 200kg high explosives or cluster munitions.[12] This and other modernization projects in the North Korean conventional military began before Kim Jong Un came to power, but like his missile and nuclear testing programs, have accelerated. There is no reason to assume that the North Korean army is unable to inflict substantial terror on Seoul and other South Korean cities at the outbreak of a war. Indisputably, this threat is the essence of North Korea's deterrence force, not its crude and nascent nuclear-weapons capabilities, which have been used primarily for opportunistic psychological warfare, not deterrence.

South Korea supplies more than 95 percent of the ground forces dedicated to the UN Command, and a substantial fraction of the air and naval power that would be brought to bear on North Korea in a war. It has also revised its rules of engagement to favor immediate and escalatory response to any North Korean attack on South Korea, such as occurred twice in 2010, once with the sinking of the corvette *Cheonan,* and then with the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island.

South Korea's conventional military is buttressed by the US military's 2nd infantry division, American fighter bombers at Kunsan Air Base, and US naval, air and other forces hosted by Japan or operating from Guam and across the western Pacific. These forces are integrated into US and allied global logistical and intelligence systems that provide real-time monitoring of North Korea's military deployments and other indicators of military readiness and deployments. In a war with North Korea, these combined forces might kill 20,000 or more North Koreans a day, quickly matching Pyongyang's terror attacks on South Korea with conventional weapons.[13]

When these bodies are stacked up against those in South Korea who would be killed by a North Korean attack, it is obvious that even in a short (say, 30-day) renewed Korean War, casualties would quickly reach between half a million and a million — assuming North Korea does not escalate to chemical weapons, that neither side uses nuclear weapons, and that China and Russia stay out of it. In the last Korean War, about 2 million soldiers and civilians died over a 3 year long war—about 2 deaths every minute for the 3 year and 33 day war.[14] A second Korean war could have similar casualty rates compressed into perhaps 3

months—one death every 3 seconds.

Thus, two vast military forces face each other in Korea, lending inherent stability to the relationship between the two. Neither side can move the other merely with small pushes and jabs, no matter how painful. And both sides are attuned to the risks of loss of control and inadvertent war along the front. In the past, they have used hotlines to resolve urgent issues in managing incidents. When the North Korean side refused to pick up the hotline, the US and South Korea have been restrained in their response to provocations. And until recently, there seemed to be zero chance that North Korea might act in ways toward South Korean or US military forces that would recall the bizarre August 1976 poplar-tree crisis, the last time that the US and its allies came close to full-scale war with North Korea involving conventional and nuclear weapons.[15]

Unfortunately, the fact that neither side is disposed to or easily able to go to war does not mean that they have no usable military options.

One of the reasons that North Korea has pursued nuclear weapons is to use the nuclear threat to force the US, South Korea and Japan to change their policies towards North Korea — a use known as compellence in contrast to deterrence. Having a nuclear weapon that can be delivered means that Kim Jong Un may feel emboldened to carry out more overt or covert, but still low-level, provocations against the US or its allies in the Asia-Pacific region in the belief that the risk of nuclear war may block or limit their retaliatory response. Along the way, such attacks may be subject to loss of control, accidents or technological failure, not to mention misinterpretation by those provoked, who then escalate massively.

The US and South Korea are also not bereft of military options at levels below a threshold that might lead to all-out war.

For example, if North Korea continues to fire missiles that re-enter the atmosphere and splash down in international airline and maritime corridors without issuing the required advance notices,[16] or worse, self-destruct in flight and rain debris on Japan, the allies could simply mine one or more North Korean ports or airfields until it desists.

If Pyongyang tests rockets that endanger a US territory, for example by bracketing Guam with three or four missiles landing in the ocean around it at once, or, in a few years' time, fires a live nuclear weapon on a long-range missile that explodes in the atmosphere in the North or South Pacific,[17] then the US might use cruise missiles to destroy substantial fractions of North Korea's nuclear fuel-cycle and missile-production and launching capabilities. Although this would not end it, such an attack would certainly slow down for a year or two the accelerated pace of missile and nuclear weapons development.

Such retaliation would assuredly lead to a North Korean riposte. Pyongyang would not reply by selecting a symmetric target in scale and number. It would up the ante, seeking escalation dominance over the US by showing resolve and greater willingness to absorb casualties than the US and South Korea.

Washington and Seoul might well call it quits at that point, having demonstrated the willingness to draw the line at the first attack and having degraded the North Korean weapons of mass destruction program while retaining broad international support for their calibrated response.

Conversely, should the North Korean response to an initial retaliation by the US and South Korea be a truly massive blitz without a subsequent follow-on ground invasion, simply designed to inflict massive damage on South Korea and possibly Japan, then one option in the midst of a tsunami of precision-guided molten steel heading north would be for the US and its allies to continue to fight until their

forces controlled a band of North Korean territory around 100 km north of the DMZ and as close to Pyongyang as Seoul is today to the DMZ. The US and the ROK could then declare time out to China on condition that it ensure that Kim Jong Un terminates the war or faces the consequences. This would be a prudent strategic move by the allies, although like US President George Bush Senior's decision not to advance to Baghdad and overthrow Saddam Hussein in the first Gulf War, it likely would be criticized by hawks in Washington, Tokyo and Seoul. It would take a US president of stature to resist the pressure to remove Kim Jong Un from power.

Of course, such military pressure from the US and South Korea might also force to the surface hidden cracks and flaws in the otherwise monolithic North Korean state structure, leading to regional warlords breaking loose from central control and potentially looting their areas of control, or launching civil wars and wars of revenge on their own. Such a collapse induced by war on or in North Korea presents many military dilemmas for the US and South Korea.

In such circumstances, South Korea would feel compelled to attempt to assert control over all of North Korea by deploying special forces to control key points throughout the country, inevitably a sanguinary exercise in occupation and pacification. The US military would prefer not to be involved in such bloody operations in which human rights are likely to be discarded not far north of the DMZ. Moreover, breakaway units in North Korea may act in ways that induce US and South Korean forces to enter into the fray, with all the attendant risks.

Collapse of central control raises the prospect of North Korean loss of control of nuclear warheads and fissile material. These sensitive items might start to move around or even out of North Korea on their way to rogue states or non-state terrorist organizations. US, South Korean, Chinese and Russian counter-WMD forces are likely to deploy rapidly and forcefully into North Korea to secure these materials and hardware, with an obvious need for de-confliction measures, but with little or no prior consultation or co-ordination, and all the potential for inadvertent collisions that could internationalize an already complex war zone.

Finally, depending on the season, such military contingencies may occur in weather that poses an immense humanitarian crisis due to food and energy shortages in mid-winter. Thus, allied forces would not only have to fight their way north; they'd have to bring along a logistics tail able to keep millions of desperate North Korean civilians alive while trying to figure out who is in the active military and who is not.[18]

Conclusion

Much depends on Kim Jong Un's goal. Are his flamboyant threats and missile and nuclear tests simply to keep the US at arm's length for a few years while he rebuilds his economy and expands the reach of a nascent missile capability? Or is he seeking to speed the pace at which he forces the US to the table? He can be under few illusions that the Trump administration will abandon its policy of strategic impatience with regard to North Korea.

If North Korea's nuclear weapons are ultimately intended primarily for strategic deterrence, one can reasonably anticipate that, like a tiger in martial arts, it will soon retreat into the mountains and concentrate on tending to its own, self-inflicted wounds for a few years.

Equally, Trump may be the trigger for more escalation. No one, evidently including Trump himself, knows what his game plan is.

Is it simply to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula? To establish stable deterrence based on a combination of conventional and

nuclear threat? Does he intend to restore stability to Korea, that is, more traditional containment?

Or does he aim to force the removal of the Kim clique? The collapse of the entire regime? And the restructuring of the regional strategic landscape around forceful US-Korean reunification?

Or does he want to confront China with its own inability to solve a problem of its own making over decades of support for North Korea? If so, to what end in the US-China relationship?

Or is it none of the above, because Trump is not playing a standard geostrategic game at all? That is, in Trump's world, as one US scholar put it, one might as well say "force structure, horse structure."

To date, it is evident that Trump does not care about Korea; about nuclear war; about strategic deterrence; or even about trade in terms that denote the description "presidential" in modern US history. He is a predatory president who uses American forces as a basis for threatening adversaries and allies alike, in order to keep them off balance and confused. At each point of maximum confusion, he attempts to extract some gain — an arms deal here with South Korea, an increase in China's sanctions on North Korea there — so that he can point to the ensuing blowback as evidence of success that solidifies his political base.

This approach does not follow geostrategic logic and even favors the simultaneous pursuit of multiple and contradictory strategies. It is contrary to hegemonic leadership by consent because it rests primarily on the use of threat and coercion rather than shared values and institutional integration. In this sense, we are in a post-hegemonic interregnum; and Trump is simply a morbid symptom of this interregnum.

Of course, perhaps one angry old man and one angry young man will surprise us all by sitting down to talk, and the shared dreams of war will fade away once again. After all, it is almost always better (with apologies to Robert Scalapino) to nuclear jaw-jaw than nuclear war-war.

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Notes

[1] P. Baker, "Trump Says Military Is 'Locked and Loaded' and North Korea Will 'Regret' Threats," *New York Times,* August 11, 2017.
[2] P. Baker, S.H. Choe, "Trump Threatens 'Fire and Fury' Against North Korea if It Endangers U.S.," *New York Times,* August 8, 2017
[3] S. Holland, P. Stewart, "Trump praises Chinese efforts on North Korea 'menace,' Pyongyang warns of strike," Reuters, April 19, 2017.
[4] US Department of Defense, "Secretary Mattis Statement at the White House," News Transcript, September 3, 2017.

[5] "Full text: Trump's 2017 U.N. speech transcript," *Politico*, September 19, 2017.
[6] The transcript published in English by KCNA is found at the ROK Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, and here. For a summary, see H.S. Choe, "North Korea Hits New Level of Brinkmanship in Reacting to Trump," *New York Times*, September 22, 2017.
[7] B. Bennett, "Aides urged Trump not to ridicule Kim, Intelligence officials warned that personal attacks against North Korean leader at the U.N. could backfire," *Los Angeles Times*, September 23, 2017.
[8] Ri stated: "The ICBM marked with sacred name of the DPRK flew over the universe above the endless blue sky, the warhead of our rocket left its trace on the blue waves of the Pacific Ocean and the tremendous explosion and vibration of the hydrogen bomb were recorded by this planet." This statement hints at but does not specifically state that a DPRK live fire action is on the cards—but it connects various dots in a suggestive manner.
[9] C. Morello, "North Korea's top diplomat says strike against U.S. mainland is 'inevitable,'" Washington Post, September 23, 2017.
[10] R. Kheel, "Dunford: North Korea has not changed military posture despite rhetoric," The Hill, September 26, 2017.
[11] Roger Cavazos, "Mind the Gap Between Rhetoric and Reality", NAPSNet Special Reports, June 26, 2012.
[12] How far south depends on how far north they are deployed to reduce US-ROK ability to destroy these systems. Nautilus is conducting a technical analysis of possible casualty rates that this new system might inflict on the ROK in a war that will be published in December 2017. However, preliminary analysis indicates that it is unlikely to change the basic conclusion of the 2012 analysis cited above. The new system nevertheless reinforces an already robust conventional deterrent force wielded by Kim Jong Un.
[13] B. Demick, "Escalating tension has experts simulating a new Korean War, and the scenarios are sobering," *Los Angeles Times*, September 25, 2017.
[14] There are no accurate numbers for civilian casualties and only broad estimates for North Korean and Chinese military casualties from historical sources. The rough breakdown is about 615,000 Chinese and North Korean military deaths; about 284,000 US-ROK-UNC allied military deaths; about 1 million South Korean civilian deaths; and about 2 million North Korean civilian deaths, which sums to 3.89 million deaths (not including injuries). The Korean War lasted about 97.5 million seconds. Readers can do the math for the killing rate per minute. See World Peace Foundation, "Korea: the Korean War," Fatalities tab, August 7, 2015, here.
[15] For a detailed account of that near war, see P. Hayes, Pacific Powderkeg, American Nuclear Dilemmas in Korea, Lexington Books, 1990, pp. 131 *et passim.*
[16] The DPRK stopped issuing such notices in 2006, but its justification based on national security to ICAO was rejected by its membership, and it remains non-compliant. See "Embrace Tiger, Retreat To Mountain, Test Nuke", NAPSNet Policy Forum, July 21, 2006.
[17] As did Russia in 1956 and the early sixties, the United States in 1962, and China in 1966 (but over Lop Nor, not the ocean). See Brumfel, "How North Korea's Nuclear Tests Could Get Even More Terrifying," transcript, September 6, 2017.
[18] Peter Hayes, David von Hippel, and Roger Cavazos, "Rapid Relief and Reconstruction in a DPRK Humanitarian Energy Crisis", NAPSNet Special Reports, December 23, 2014.