Nuclear North Korea: Risk or Rhetoric?

Foreword

Should North Korea provoke its enemies by shooting down an Allied jet, firing at a naval vessel, or launching a missile at a land target, the response of the Allied forces would be profound and overwhelming. The Allied forces would respond with the use of extreme bombing, “the likes of which nobody has seen before”. In severe circumstances, the South Korean KMPR (Korean Massive Punishment and Retaliation) contingency, which calls for the total annihilation of Pyongyang, would be implemented to destroy the capital and upper rankings of the North Korean Government. However, military experts have concluded that it is unlikely there will be a tactical first strike, cyber attack, or nuclear detonation by the American, South Korean, and Japanese forces (“the Allied forces”). Therefore, the current threat of nuclear war is mostly rhetoric.

History and Timeline of North Korean Aggression

The end of WWII saw the retreat of Japanese forces from Korea, and the territory divided into the communist north and democratic south. In the north, the Soviets aided in the establishment of the communist Korean Workers’ Party. By 1948, North Korea proclaimed its independence as the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (“DPRK”) and installed Kim Il-Sung as their Supreme Leader.
In 1950, North Korean troops crossed the Demilitarized Zone (the 38th parallel) and invaded sovereign South Korea. This marked the beginning of the three-year Korean War. Fearing an American attack, North Korea, with the help of the Soviets, began to develop their own nuclear weapons (Sanger, 1994).

In 2002, the U.S named North Korea an “axis of evil.” Within the year, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, as well as an agreement with South Korea to keep the Korean Peninsula nuclear weapon-free.

In October 2006, North Korea successfully tested its first nuclear weapon underground. Since then, the North Koreans have conducted two more underground nuclear tests: one in 2009 and a second in 2012.

In 2011, Supreme Leader Kim Jong Il passed and was replaced by his youngest son, Kim Jong Un. Kim Jong Un took power and promised to rapidly develop the DPRK’s nuclear capabilities.

In January 2016, North Korea successfully built and tested their first hydrogen bomb. A bomb of this size is capable of destroying every structure within 26 square kilometres, and with prevailing winds would carry radioactive material over 270 kilometres.

On July 4, 2017, North Korea tested an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) capable of striking the Eastern United States. Although, it remains unknown if the North Koreans have developed a nuclear payload small enough for this missile.

On August 9, 2017, the North Korean government threatened a nuclear strike on Guam to send a “serious warning signal to the U.S.” This prompted President Trump to counter with the threat of “fire and fury.”

*North Korean Ballistic Missile Launches*

SOURCE: FINANCIAL TIMES, STATISTA
Military Options Available

Military Strength in the Asia Pacific Region

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>North Korean Forces</th>
<th>Allied Forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Active-Duty Troops</td>
<td>1.19M</td>
<td>362,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanks and Armored Vehicles</td>
<td>2,414</td>
<td>4,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artillery Pieces</td>
<td>21,180</td>
<td>62,178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helicopters</td>
<td>302</td>
<td>1,140</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naval Vessels</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>180</td>
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In the war games simulated, by various departments of the U.S military, there was profound loss of life and serious economic implications. Further, an unstable North Korean regime would engage in self-destructive behaviour when faced with impending doom.

A Cyber Attack

Cyber Warfare is not a viable long-term strategy to destabilize the North Korean missile system. With antiquated technology and the population’s limited access to computers, it is unlikely the U.S could orchestrate a successful, nuclear crippling, cyber attack. In many of the tested scenarios, a debilitating attack would, at most, result in a 1-2 year setback, similar to that of the Stuxnet virus in Iran. However, a U.S cyber attack would provoke the regime to take retaliatory actions, which may include a nuclear strike against Guam or a North Korean cyber attack on the U.S power grid.

A Tactical First Strike

The goal of a tactical first strike is to critically damage or eliminate a series of strategic targets comprised of Military Bases, Nuclear Reactors, Missile Production Facilities, and Mobile Missile Launching Pads. An attack would begin in the air with B22 bombers unleashing a massive artillery strike. Subsequently, U.S and South Korean naval ships would fire Tomahawk missiles at any targets not destroyed or capable of returning fire (Cohen, 2017). Meanwhile, fighter jets would destroy the approximate 2,000 missile and artillery launchers stacked on the border and pointed directly at Seoul.

The challenges lie in the mountainous terrain of North Korea, which makes the likelihood of identifying and destroying all targets slim. Further, an attack of this magnitude would require a build-up of Allied troops and supplies in South Korea, potentially notifying the DPRK of an imminent attack. This would cause the DPRK to fire missiles or artillery at Seoul, Tokyo, Busan, Sendai, and/or Nagoya, which would result in millions of deaths.

In many of the simulated war games, the effect of bombings was only enough to delay nuclear development 2-3 years (Cohen, 2017).

Given Kim Jong Un’s previous actions, a tactical first strike could not go unanswered and would lead to a full military engagement. The allied forces are rightfully hesitant to engage in a full-scale invasion of North Korea. The end result would be a military occupation of a war ravaged, decimated population (Curran, 2017).

The Global Nuclear Fallout

A nuclear war with North Korea would bring devastating loss of life. Estimated fatalities range from 8 million to over 30 million with other major impacts on the health and quality of life in Asia. Radiation related cancers and birth defects have been directly linked to being exposed to nuclear radiation. A large enough nuclear warhead would result in radioactive exposure to humans, animals, and crops throughout Asia and the Pacific (Edwards, 2017).
Allied Sponsored Regime Change

Foreign policy experts predict that any regime change in North Korea would require the support of the Chinese, North Korea’s closest ally, while still being satisfactory to the South Korean government (Sokolsky, 2017).

The challenge with regime change is that Kim Jong Un has consolidated power by removing anyone capable of replacing him. Evidencing this is the assassination of his half-brother and any military leaders believed to be un-loyal to the regime. Another deterrent is that there are no guarantees that a newly installed government would be more favourable to Western policies. A regime change would result in large tensions between the factions of the North Korean military and government who are opposed to liberal policies. This would result in either more of the status quo or a large internal power struggle (Sokolsky, 2017).

With all the uncertainties and the magnitude of consequences, it is unlikely that China could support this option. Without the support of China, regime change remains unlikely.

Diplomacy and The Status Quo

After laying out the previous options, it remains clear that the best solution is diplomacy. As NSA advisor, H.R McMaster stated, “the situation has no simple solution but what we hope to do is avoid war.”

Any negotiated agreement would rely heavily on China, the chief negotiator in the region. If China halted the supply of oil to North Korea, there would be an immediate effect on the country’s economy and military capabilities. This would quickly bring an open-minded North Korea to the negotiating table. However, cooperation from China would come at a steep price. The Chinese government would ask the U.S for cooperation with any or all of the following:

A) Acknowledging the sovereign right of China to the man-made islands in the South China Sea,
B) Removing the U.S military presence from the Korean Gulf including the land and air troops stationed in South Korea and Japan or,
C) Withdrawing from the Mutual Defence Treaty with the Republic of Korea.

All three of these options add a layer of complexity to an already fragile environment. Diplomacy, being the least dramatic and most pragmatic, would likely include private negotiations and backdoor communications (Feldman, 2017).

However, in any diplomatic solution, the U.S would require U.N inspections of the DPRK’s nuclear facilities. Given the current U.S administrations stance on the Iranian nuclear deal, it is unlikely that a similar deal could be negotiated with North Korea.
Alternatively, the U.S could employ a “fear strategy” similar to one used against the Soviets in the cold war. In the most serious show of force, the U.S would re-introduce nuclear weapons to both Japan and South Korea. With this strategy, the Allied forces must be careful not to make the North Koreans feel too threatened. If they do so, North Korea could respond with a nuclear strike. This strategy is very unlikely as it would cause serious tensions with China, who adamantly wants as little U.S presence in the South Peninsula as possible.

Economic and Climate Implications of Nuclear War

Economic Implications

Conflict with North Korea would lead to a plethora of economic consequences for some of the world's largest economies. Before a military war is even considered, China and the U.S would likely see themselves involved in a trade war using tariffs or quotas. Foreign economic pressure placed on China has historically resulted in a tit-for-tat response, proving a lack of benefit for either nation.

If military war erupts, the economic implications are very bleak. Since WWII, countries ravaged by war have experienced noticeable drops in their economic output. This is mostly due to the mass destruction of their economy and infrastructure.

The following chart displays the GDP drop of countries involved in wars after WWII. This being the case, we would expect to see severe damage to South Korea's economy, which is the 11th largest in the world and accounts for 2% of the global GDP. A war in North Korea could also result in millions of North Korean refugees crossing into the slowly developing region of north-east China. China is the world's second largest economy and would suffer from the instability caused by this mass influx of refugees.

Overall, the entire world economy would suffer from the uncertainty caused by war and the resulting depressed economic output.

After a war, any reconstruction would be led by China as opposed to the U.S or South Korea. This is due to the following:

- A war torn North Korea would not have the resources to rebuild itself and would rely heavily on its closest ally China.
- Protectionist China would be hesitant to allow the U.S or South Korea to spearhead reconstruction and bring combatant forces to its border.
- The mass mineral resources, estimated between USD$6-10 trillion, act as an incentive for China to quickly intervene and claim them for themselves (Kilalea, 2017).
China, who has long been seen as the superpower in the region, would spearhead the re-development as a show of force and power. The Chinese government would stipulate that all re-construction be completed using Chinese companies and workers.

**A Nuclear Winter**

A small scale nuclear war would decrease the world temperature by approximately 1.25°C, disrupting global crop cycles and sending the world into a small ice age. The result would be a severe food deficit and drought (Edwards, 2017). In the event of global nuclear war, one with both the U.S and Russia releasing nuclear payloads, a full-scale ice age would occur causing a multi-year nuclear winter (Toon, 2008).

It is increasingly clear that a nuclear war would have dire consequences on the earth. Those fortunate to survive an initial attack would be left with major health consequences and no resources, including a livable climate, to survive.

**Conclusion**

Given the alarming consequences of war, the general consensus amongst military officials remains that a diplomatically negotiated solution is the best option. The cost of nuclear war is too damaging on human life, health, and the global economy to outweigh the threat that North Korea currently poses. North Korea will continue their nuclear launches, as the success of their nuclear program is vital to the survival of Kim Jong Un. However, there is no reason to believe that North Korea is planning to fire at land targets, as the consequences of an Allied attack would be devastating. Therefore, it is evident that the threat of nuclear war with North Korea remains mostly rhetoric, not risk.
Bibliography


