

**Unpacking a US Decision to
Use Force Against North Korea:
Issues, Options, and Consequences**

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About the Author

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Introduction

Never, never, never believe any war will be smooth and easy, or that anyone who embarks on that strange voyage can measure the tides and hurricanes he will encounter. The Statesman who yields to war fever must realise that once the signal is given, he is no longer the master of policy but the slave of unforeseeable and uncontrollable events. Antiquated War Offices, weak, incompetent or arrogant Commanders, untrustworthy allies, hostile neutrals, malignant Fortune, ugly surprise, awful miscalculations—all take their seats at the Council Board on the morrow of a declaration of war. Always remember, however sure you are that you can easily win, that there would not be a war if the other man did not think he also had a chance.

~ Winston Churchill, *My Early Life*

Many of the recent difficulties we encountered in strategic decision-making, operational planning, and force development have stemmed, at least in part, from the neglect of history and continuities in the nature of war, especially war's political and human dimensions. ... Because... fallacies about future war have become widely accepted [it is often believed] ... that future war will be fundamentally different from those that have gone before it.

~ General H. R. McMaster, “Discussing the Continuities of War and the Future of Warfare: The Defense Entrepreneurs Forum,” *Small Wars Journal*

Although there is no formula for evaluating the likely efficacy of using force against North Korea, there are a number of factors, dilemmas, and trade-offs that should be considered.

It is often hard to predict the physical effects of any use of force because there are multiple uncertainties. Even more difficult and important is the need to estimate the political impact that the damage will produce. Short of an all-out war, this is the paramount question. To paraphrase Clausewitz, a military strike is a form of politics by other means.

We need to start by asking what is the objective we hope to achieve, why do we expect the proposed measures to achieve it, what are the likely side effects and costs we can anticipate and how they might be mitigated, and what should we do if our measures fail to have the intended results.¹

Unless force is aimed at totally disarming North Korea or overthrowing its regime, its initially limited application would be an instrument of pressure and bargaining. It would be designed to strengthen our hand and weaken North Korea's. Although presumably, it would destroy some of the North's military capabilities, it is coercion and bargaining because the US would be trying to influence Pyongyang's decision on how to respond. The war must be kept limited if the American victory is to be worth the gamble. The enemy gets more than a vote; he gets to decide.²

Escalation: A Complicated Equation

Force works through two main channels: brute force physically achieves the objective by destroying or crippling the adversary's capabilities; coercion works by inflicting pain on the adversary, threatening to inflict more, and changing his calculations about the costs and benefits of alternative courses of action. In the latter case, it is the adversary's intentions as much as his capabilities that we are targeting. Some actions can work through both channels: decreasing the other side's capabilities would affect its ability to carry out military operations, but as long as coercion is involved, we would be seeking to influence how the adversary thinks and decides. Even a strike that produces a *fait accompli*, like destroying launch or test facilities, is a new stage in the process, not the end of it.

In general, the more ambitious the goal, the more difficult it will be to achieve because the adversary will resist more strongly. Force is almost always a measure of last resort, which means that previous efforts have failed, and this indicates that the adversary is willing and able to stand his ground. That said, arguing that force may well fail does not mean that the policy should not be adopted since no other instrument may be effective. In some cases, adopting a policy that has only a low probability of success is appropriate when the alternatives are even worse.

The fact that the US has much greater military and economic capability than North Korea does not mean that it can prevail. This is obviously true in the interaction so far, and to attribute the failure only to a lack of American willingness to be tougher may be wrong. We also have to consider the willingness of North Korea to pay a price and run risks in order to maintain its nuclear program, which it probably sees as critical both to the survival of the Kim Dynasty

¹ A full treatment would require trying to compare the answers with the expected costs and benefits of using other instruments and of allowing North Korea to develop an ICBM capability and applying deterrence to limit the consequences. But here I will focus only on how we should think about using force to coerce North Korea into not deploying ICBMs.

² Of course, this approach implies that Kim or whoever is making decisions in North Korea can be deterred from an all-out response as force is being used against him. This is in some tension with the belief apparently held by some in the US government that Kim could not be deterred from taking various harmful actions if he attains the ability to strike American homeland with nuclear weapons.

as well as the state. Of course, should the conflict end in all-out war, the North would suffer much more than the US and its allies. But this does not necessarily mean that it would fold in a contest of wills: an all-out context would be disastrous for the US as well, and Pyongyang might misjudge the willingness of the US to escalate or believe that the US would destroy it even if it made concessions, and the intensity of its preference to maintain at least some nuclear capability could lead it to be willing to run very high risks.

This is important because, unless the initial military strike is truly disarming, it must gain its political impact and influence on North Korea by carrying the threat to do more. The very fact that the US has taken an unprecedented and dangerous act lends some credibility to the threat to continue and escalate, but the need to threaten to do more is in some tension with the need to convince North Korea not to retaliate. The US could try to reach this goal by threatening Pyongyang with a massive response if it does use force, but unless the North decides to capitulate, it could feel itself in a “use it or lose it” situation and believe that, unlike the Soviet Union, it would rather go down fighting. It could also calculate that at least some military response is needed to provide bargaining leverage.

Gaining Compliance and Keeping the War Limited

Assuming at least minimal rationality, the adversary’s decision is driven by his expectations about the future. Three implications follow:

- First, it is the targets that have not yet been hit and that we can still hold at risk that exert the influence. Saving these is the main incentive for the adversary to comply—a hostage that is destroyed loses its value.
- Second, if the use of force is to be effective, the adversary must believe that it will be continued if he does not comply. This means that our use of force must not be self-defeating by provoking so much domestic or international opposition that the adversary doubts that it can be applied in the future.
- Third, when we use coercion, promises as well as threats must be made credible. We need to convince the adversary that if he does comply, we will cease using force and not increase our demands. Leaders and policy analysts usually concentrate on making threats credible, but establishing the credibility of promises is as important and often more difficult, especially with a country like North Korea which harbors total mistrust of the United States and believes that the US government is unremittingly hostile to its existence.

Although a wide variety of strikes are possible, all except those designed to overthrow the regime would presumably have as a major objective setting back the North Korean missile and/or nuclear program. But even if the North did not retaliate, it might rebuild. If it did, the US would have to be prepared to strike again. But the credibility of the threat to “mow the grass,” to use the Israeli phrase, while presumably endowed with added credibility by the fact of the initial strike, would depend in part on the reaction of the rest of the world (and American domestic opinion). How much credibility would be sufficient to deter the North, furthermore, would

depend on how committed it was to the program and whether it believed that acquiescing would embolden the US and lead it to seek to overthrow the regime.

It is important to try to think of all the ways the North could retaliate, seeking both to keep the war limited and to show the US that it too could inflict pain and reduce American capability. Chemical attacks might serve that purpose well, and the North not only has enormous stockpiles but its choice of a nerve agent to kill Kim's half-brother was presumably chosen less for efficiency than for the message it sent. A small chemical attack against Seoul could split off South Korea from the US, make the American soldiers don their chemical suits, and provide credible evidence that the North was not going to simply capitulate while keeping the danger of an unlimited US response within bounds.

The fact that the adversary has a choice of whether to comply has two additional implications. First, as the US discovered to its grief in Vietnam, the willingness to suffer is a source of power. The likelihood of the success of our use of force therefore depends on North Korea's will. Second, the North's willingness to bear pain rather than give in is related to what is being demanded of it. The more a state values what it is being asked to give up, the greater its resistance is likely to be. Compliance is more likely if our objectives are more limited and we are willing to end the war in something closer to a compromise than a complete victory.

The willingness to resist can change when force is applied and unfortunately for analytic clarity changes in both directions are possible. In some cases, states believe that honor and credibility require at least token resistance and so are more likely to comply after suffering even limited defeats. In other cases, however, the application of force stiffens the adversary's resistance because it believes that making concessions in the face of force will lead to further demands. The latter reaction is particularly likely in light of what is almost surely the North's perception of the continuing American hostility to the nature of its regime.

Of course, "the adversary" is an abstraction and decisions are made by individuals and small groups. Although North Korea is a dictatorship, it is not completely united, as Kim Jong Un's frequent executions remind us. One question is who we are trying to influence. The obvious answer is Kim himself, but especially if force is used, the top ranks of the military (itself probably not unified) may be the relevant target. The massive application of force did not convince Hitler to surrender, but by the summer of 1944 it did convince many brave military officers to try to stage a coup. Kim and his military may have different values and preferences. The former is likely to be more deeply wedded to the preservation of the Kim dynasty, and maintaining North Korea's nuclear power maybe central to this. By contrast, the military may care more about the survival of the state. All of them, however, surely care about personal survival, which means that any use of force that aims for anything less than conquest will have to think about how to make credible promises that the leaders can survive.

The Importance of Adversary Perceptions and Beliefs

Like threats in peacetime, a military strike does its main work by conveying the message that more punishment and destruction will follow unless the adversary changes its behavior. The

North's behavior will depend not on the impression we want to convey, however, but on what Kim and his advisers make of our strike. The US can control what it does, but not what the North sees and believes. While determining this with certainty is impossible, estimating it is necessary. Any plan or thinking about what force might produce that does not try to interpret the world as the North would see it is worse than useless.³

A military strike will want to convey both resolve and restraint, but it is the adversary's perceptions that will determine whether this happens. An example in American history shows the importance of the target's reaction and the possibility of predicting it incorrectly. The Japanese believed that if it crippled the US fleet at Pearl Harbor, the US would agree to a limited loss, conceding control of the Western Pacific to Japan. This thought never crossed the minds of the American leaders or public, who went on to fight an unlimited war. Needless to say, not all unintended effects are negative: none of those who authorized the Doolittle raid on Tokyo in April 1942 realized that its major effect would be to induce the Japanese to put enormous resources into the air defenses of Japan, resources that could have been much better used in the field for the next two years. (Nor did we anticipate the fierce Japanese retaliation against the areas in China where the B-25s landed.)

Several kinds of unintended meanings could derail the policy. The adversary may believe that the state is now bent on destroying it and that its only choices are surrender or all-out resistance, even if this is unlikely to stave off eventual defeat. A different but also undesired interpretation is possible: unless it is completely taken by surprise the adversary will have expected some military action by the state. If the state's action is less destructive in scope, the adversary will feel no pressure to change its ways. The US is likely to think that a strike will show how much it is willing to do to stop North Korea's program, but, especially after all the American tough talk, the North might see the strike as less than it expected and reduce its estimate of US resolve. For example, a strike against testing facilities would not change North Korean behavior if it expected an even more intense attack. (This reasoning of course applies in conflict short of the use of force. When North Korea undertakes some provocation like a missile or nuclear test, it presumably expects some negative response from the US and the world. Unless the forthcoming response is more than the North expected, the North will have every reason to stay on its course.)

Although North Korea is the main actor whose response to the use of force needs to be gauged, the outcome also depends on how third parties react. These include allies and adversaries as well as the court of international and US domestic opinion, and any plan would need to estimate how they would respond. For what it is worth, my guess is that most parties would condemn the US strike and urge both sides to be "reasonable," step back from the brink, and enter a cooling-off period that would be followed by negotiations. This would conflict with the American need to continue if not increase pressure on the North. Assuming the US does continue on this course, the impact on foreign relations would heavily depend on the outcome of the confrontation. Success probably would lead allies to forgive the US (and ask the US to forgive them); China and Russia might be cowed, but also increase their defense budgets; Iran would pay careful attention, but it is hard to tell what lessons it would learn. The consequences of failure are likely

³ To point out that North Korean leaders may not see the situation as we do is not to argue that they are irrational, but just that understanding how they are likely to behave requires grasping their values and perceptions.

to be grave, which of course increases the incentives for the US to use more force against the North if the initial strike does not produce the desired outcome.

The stance of allies will be at least to some degree affected by whether we consult with them before using force. But doing so has drawbacks. First, the Europeans are sure to object and under current circumstances, South Korea and probably Japan would do so as well. Second, secrecy would be much harder to maintain. There is an upside, however, to such leaks: they would make the American threat to use force more credible, although whether this would be enough to alter North Korean behavior is uncertain.

Words and force may seem antithetical, but the speech that the president gives when the strikes are occurring and the parallel private messages should not be viewed as a mere adjunct to the strike, but are a crucial part of the strategy. One question here is exactly what the US should demand of North Korea. That it must immediately enter into negotiations? That it must cease all nuclear and missile testing and not rebuild any facilities we have destroyed? That it turn over all nuclear material and missiles to the US (or to China or some other third party)? That it simply accept what the US has done and not retaliate? Other aspects of the messaging may matter as well, and the US would want to explain itself in a way that minimizes the probability that Kim would retaliate. At this stage of the conflict, the room for such influence would be small but still significant.

Even with the most propitious American strategy, the North might be more likely to comply or engage in fruitful negotiations if it first carried out some limited retaliation of its own. Such a move by North Korea would be more than “face-saving” (a consideration not to be scorned); it would also show that Pyongyang was not powerless and that even if it could be coerced, there were limits beyond which it would not be pushed. In other words, a retaliation by the North after an American attack would not necessarily have to lead to continued violence but might be a move to pave the way to negotiations that could reduce, if not eliminate, the North’s nuclear program. The US will then need to plan for how its responses to a North Korean retaliation would balance continued coercion with encouraging restraint and negotiation.

One sharp choice is whether to accompany the strike with a clear message that any North Korean retaliation would be met by a much more severe American military response. The greater the clarity of the American message, the greater the deterrent effect. But if North Korea is not deterred, the US would find it hard not to live up to its threat, which, while putting increased pressure on Pyongyang, also might set off undesired escalation as well as stir up strong opposition at home and abroad. I suspect that it would be hard for the US not to warn the North against retaliating, but both a tit-for-tat cycle and an unlimited war are easily imaginable consequences.

As previously noted, a possible advantage of consulting with allies is that the information would leak, providing a fairly credible signal to Pyongyang that the US was willing to use force if necessary. This brings up the broader trade-off between enhancing coercion on the one hand and the benefits of surprise on the other. Measures that the US could take to increase the North’s expectation that the US will soon strike would put the North (and others) on notice that a limited if not all-out war was increasingly likely. The stepped-up pressure could lead to compliance, which is the purpose of the move. But there are also three dangers:

- First, it is possible, although unlikely, that China and even Russia might make explicit counter-threats, telling the US that “it would not stand idly by” (in the words of older diplomacy) if the US struck.
- Second and more likely, US allies, including South Korea and possibly Japan, would urge mutual restraint which would both undercut American threats and increase the diplomatic price the US would pay if it did use force. (Striking in the face of allied or domestic opposition might increase the credibility of follow-on attacks, because it would show US willingness to act even when doing so was costly.)
- Third, North Korea would be alerted and could take counter-measures that would reduce the effectiveness of an American strike. Although the North must be already seeking to protect itself, presumably some advantages of surprise remain, and these are diminished in direct proportion to the credibility of American threats.

What Kind of Strikes?

The choices about the nature and extent of any military strikes pose difficulties. To start with, considerations of force protection will generate strong incentives to hit targets like air defenses that may rule out some limited strikes. Second, while destroying some targets both reduces the adversary’s capabilities and inflicts pain, there can be a choice between the two. For example, attacking sources of the ruling elite’s wealth and well-being affect the latter but not the former. Third, some targets are largely symbolic, doing little real damage but perhaps exerting influence by showing the attacker’s willingness to cross previously inviolable lines. For instance, the Trump administration’s strike against the Syrian airbase fits in this category.⁴

Some strikes that significantly reduce North Korea’s capabilities probably would increase the chance of something approximating an all-out North Korean response with whatever it had left, in the belief that the US was not seeking to keep the war limited or, conversely, that only a really sharp response had any chance of convincing the US to back off. The question of whether to hit command-and-control centers poses a particularly stark trade-off. On the one hand, the military advantages of doing so are likely to be great. On the other hand, control might devolve to local units who, either because of pre-existing orders or their own initiative, would strike back in an unlimited fashion.

There are obvious incentives for the US to make its initial strikes quite large both to reduce the North’s military capability and to increase the credibility of further attacks by showing that the US is not content with symbolic strikes. But large attacks are also more likely to leave the impression that the US is dedicated to regime change, thereby removing Kim’s incentives to be

⁴ There can be great uncertainties and errors in the estimates of the value of any given target. Several years ago, I participated in a war game in which my team struck a certain target to convey our resolve only to have the other side respond by launching all-out war. It turned out that, although my team was very well-informed, no one on it knew that the target we selected contained particularly sensitive facilities.

restrained. (Of course, it is possible that the generals could see a difference between Kim's fate and theirs, and stage a coup and sue for peace.)

Once violence is used, not only are emotions likely to play a larger role, but states also will be prone to gamble. Historically, states that have suffered losses are willing to run higher risks to try to restore the status quo than they would have been willing to tolerate in order to improve their peacetime situations. This obviously does not mean that North Korea would automatically escalate in response to a limited American attack, but it does mean that prudent planning has to take into account the likelihood of the North accepting high risks if doing so holds out a possibility of recouping the losses it had just suffered.

It is imperative that throughout the process, the US consult as closely as possible with South Korea, not only because many of our assets are there, but also because much of what is at stake in the conflict is the credibility of our promises to protect our allies, especially South Korea, and this in turn depends on how much the North believes we are invested in South Korean independence and welfare. Since the main point of keeping forces in the South is to shield it from the North, it would be ironic if the American threats or use of force succeeded in curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions only to convince the South that in the long run neutrality was the safer policy.

A Partial Checklist

Some of this can be summarized in a checklist of questions that planners should ask when contemplating a military strike (many of these questions also apply to the use of other instruments as well). For several of the questions we need to think of the answers not only for North Korea but for many other countries as well: South Korea, Japan, NATO, China, Russia, Iran, and in some cases US domestic opinion.

- Is North Korea bluffing (i.e., will a sufficiently credible threat to strike lead it to comply with American demands)?
- What immediate response is desired and expected (if these two are different) from a strike?
- How would we credibly convey the limits of our demands? Should the strike be accompanied by promises of possible rewards if the North complies?
- What next steps would the US take if North Korea offers negotiations? Complies? Makes a tit-for-tat response? Escalates? Simply does nothing?
- How might North Korea adapt to our strike?
- How do we expect the North and other states to respond over the longer run?
- What else could go wrong?

Conclusion

It may not be an accident that one of Dwight Eisenhower's favorite sayings was "plans are useless but planning is everything," and that as president, he was very reluctant to use force. He knew that when armed forces are put into motion, the outcome would be difficult to predict and control; he also understood the importance of thinking through alternative possibilities and the ways in which adversaries and third parties might react. Of course, the difficulties and multiple possibilities arise with the use of all policy instruments, and there is an obvious danger that planning of the sort I have urged could lead to paralysis. Anecdotal evidence indicates that decision-makers tend to be more decisive than academics, and this may be a good thing. But force is a particularly dangerous instrument, especially when wielded against a state that has nuclear weapons (and even without them can hold a close ally's capital hostage). So careful thought and planning is particularly necessary here, and along with it, should come great efforts to overcome the common propensity to believe that the adversary will see your behavior as you intend it and will respond in ways that serve your interests.

Planning for an all-out war is difficult enough; additional layers of problems appear when we are thinking about a limited war, as is the case here. Although the destruction of North Korean capabilities is not irrelevant, it is not the ultimate objective. Rather, this is a situation of intense bargaining which, while being coercive, is not in our unilateral control. We can try to manipulate North Korea's incentives, but it is how Pyongyang sees the situation, estimates our intentions and future behavior, and decides how to behave that will shape the outcome. Although unlimited wars are dreadful in their destructiveness, limited wars call for even more care in their conduct and planning. Winston Churchill did not hesitate to use force when he concluded that this was necessary, but he understood that armed conflict, even with adversaries who have fewer material resources, requires extraordinary preparation and understanding.