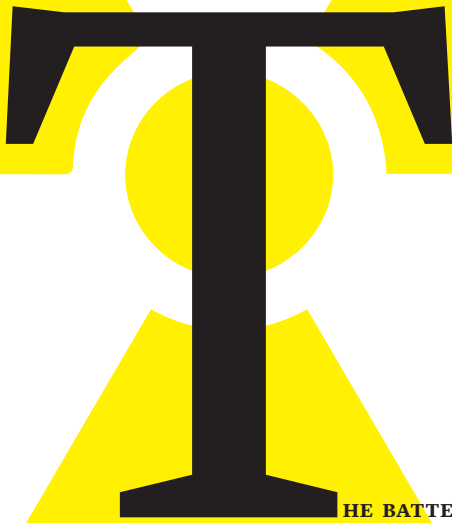


MADMAN ACROSS THE WATER

BY BILL POWELL

TAKING OUT NORTH KOREA'S NUCLEAR WEAPONS
WON'T BE QUICK, AND IT WON'T BE EASY





THE BATTERIES OF

North Korean artillery lie on just the other side of the divided peninsula's demilitarized zone. There are thousands of them—some hidden, others out in the open. Artillery shells are stored in an elaborate network of tunnels; and though much of the weaponry and ammunition is old, U.S. forces stationed in South Korea have no doubt they would be effective.

Less than 40 miles to the south is the sprawling city of Seoul, the capital of South Korea, with a metropolitan area of 24 million inhabitants. Ever since a cease-fire ended hostilities between North and South Korea in 1953, the residents of Seoul have lived with the knowledge that a war with their brethren in the north could break out again; it is a notion not often acknowledged but embedded in their DNA.

And now, again, the fraught Korean Peninsula seems a single miscalculation away from calamity. Since his election, President Donald Trump and his foreign policy team have escalated their rhetoric about the North, insisting that U.S. patience with North Korea's nuclear and missile program has run out. Pyongyang has responded with rhetoric even more bellicose than usual. On April 20, a state-owned newspaper threatened that Pyongyang would deliver a "super-mighty pre-emptive strike" against the U.S., whose forces were in the midst of massive military exercises with their South Korean ally.

No one in Seoul is heading for the bomb shelters yet. Pragmatism, and an abiding assumption that nothing terribly bad will actually happen, prevails. "No matter how much tensions increase, we just go about our lives," says Park Chung Hee, a 40-year-old businessman whose grandfather was killed in the Korean War. "What else can we do?"

But everyone living on the peninsula knows that those North Korean artillery batteries are there to pummel Seoul if another war breaks out. And that if it does, Seoul will get hit, and hit hard. The amount of time from the instant a shell is fired to impact in the South Korean capital? Just 45 seconds.

U.S. alarm about North Korea has spiked for two main reasons. The first is the aggressive missile-testing regimen

Pyongyang has carried out under Kim Jong Un. During his four-year reign, Pyongyang has already test-fired 66 missiles, more than twice as many as his father, Kim Jong Il, did during his 17 years in office. Kim's regime has gradually increased the range of its missiles. Combine that with North Korea's efforts to miniaturize its nuclear arsenal so that its 10 to 16 bombs can fit onto a warhead, "and you have two streams coming together—range and miniaturization—that you don't want to cross," says retired Admiral James Stavridis, now dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

Some U.S. commanders fear the North can already put a nuclear warhead on a missile. Admiral Bill Gortney, head of the North American Aerospace Command, told Congress two years ago that he believes Pyongyang can use a medium-range missile to deliver a nuclear payload, meaning it can hit South Korea or Japan. The consensus intelligence estimate is that the North is now 18 to 36 months away from sticking a nuke on a missile that can reach Los Angeles.

All that explains why, from both current and former military officials, there has been increasing talk of pre-emption. In November 2016, General Walter Sharp, former commander of U.S. Forces Korea, said that if North Korea puts a long-range missile on a launch pad and the U.S. is unsure of its payload, Washington should order a pre-emptive attack to destroy that missile.

But the grim reality is that a pre-emptive strike, against North Korean missiles or nuclear facilities—or both—could well mean war. Should the day come when Trump



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believes he needs to order a pre-emptive strike against targets in North Korea to eliminate a direct threat, the U.S. will not be able to take out all of the North Korean artillery front-loaded near the border.

"Not," says former National Security Council staffer Victor Cha, "without using tactical nuclear weapons," which is not something the U.S. would consider, given that Seoul is right down the road. A U.S. strike, simply put, could well trigger the second Korean War.

WHAT WOULD another armed conflict on the peninsula look like? During the Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953, some 2.7 million Koreans died, along with 33,000 Americans and 800,000 Chinese. In any pre-emption scenario now, the U.S. would try to keep the strike limited to the task at hand; at the same time, Washington would signal in any way it could—probably via the North's ally in Beijing—that it did not seek a wider war.



+ SMOKE ON THE WATER: A North Korean missile launch from 2016. Pyongyang's aggressive testing has alarmed the Trump administration.

For the past two years, the U.S. and South Korea have been practicing pre-emption exercises. In 2015, they adopted a new war plan, OPLAN 5015, that includes attacks on the North's nuclear and missile facilities, as well as "decapitation attacks" against Kim Jong Un and the rest of the North Korean leadership.

South Korea also developed its own pre-emptive attack plans and has acquired, U.S. and Korean officials say, weapons capable of destroying some of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction. In addition, Seoul has built an elaborate defense system, which includes the recent delivery of the U.S. terminal high altitude area defense system, which shoots down incoming missiles in the final phase of their descent.

The U.S. does not want to have to pre-empt, of course. As Trump's national security adviser, H.R. McMaster, said on April 16, every option "short of war" is on the table in order to dissuade the North from deploying nukes on long-range missiles. "No one is looking for a fight here," insists another Trump adviser, who was not authorized to speak about this matter on the record.

Whether it does will come down to how Kim reacts to the pressure now being put on him by the West. The U.S. knows relatively little about the young man's psyche and stability, but what it does know isn't encouraging. In addition to his aggressive missile testing program, Kim has a new war plan

of his own: to complete an invasion of South Korea within a week using asymmetric capabilities (including nuclear weapons and missiles).

Reunification of the two Koreas under Pyongyang's rule, as ludicrous as that possibility seems to the outside world, has always been the foremost goal of both Kim and his father. For a while, in the wake of the famine in the late 1990s that killed tens of thousands of North Koreans and the deep, relentless poverty that followed, military strategists began to discount that possibility, believing it to be rhetoric unmoored from reality. All you had to do was look at the satellite images of Seoul and Pyongyang at night, one brightly lit and the other dark, to see which half of Korea was strong and which was weak.

And although the economic disparity hasn't changed much, the North's weaponry has, its war plan has, and its dictator's bellicose rhetoric has. The young man known in China as "Fatty Kim the Third" (Kim Jong Un is the grandson of Kim Il Sung, who was the supreme leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) from its founding in 1948 until 1994) appears to be serious about leading a nuclear power. In speeches, he mentions the reunification far more often than his father did, North Korea watchers say. If the U.S. launches a pre-emptive strike, Kim appears likely to hit back, starting with an artillery barrage—thousands of rounds per hour.

"Without moving a single soldier in its million-man army," says former CIA analyst Bruce Klingner, now at the

Heritage Foundation, “the North could launch a devastating attack on Seoul.”

Would the two sides be able to de-escalate at that point? A senior North Korean military defector has said that under Kim’s new war plan, the North intends to try to occupy all of South Korea before significant U.S. reinforcements could flow in from Japan and elsewhere. This invasion could start, Cha wrote in his recent book, *The Impossible State*, by terrorizing the South Korean population with chemical weapons. “An arsenal of 600 chemically armed Scud missiles would be fired on all South Korean airports, train stations and marine ports, making it impossible for civilians to escape.”

The North’s arsenal of medium-range missiles could also be fitted with chemical warheads and launched at Japan, delaying the flow of U.S. reinforcements. And those reinforcements would be urgently needed on the Korean Peninsula, since the U.S. has only 28,000 troops in South Korea, and the South’s armed forces, though far better trained and equipped than the North’s, consist of 660,000 men, more than 300,000 smaller than the North’s.

U.S. war planners believe North Korean forces would try to overrun South Korea’s defenses and get to Seoul before the U.S. and the South could respond with overwhelming force. As Cha says, “As wars go, this would be the most unforgiving battle conditions that can be imagined—an extremely high density of enemy and allied forces—over 2 million mechanized forces all converging on a total battlespace the equivalent of the distance between Washington, D.C., and Boston.”

The United States would immediately dispatch four to six ground combat divisions of up to 20,000 troops each, 10 Air Force wings of about 20 fighters per unit and four to five aircraft carriers. In Cha’s scenario, U.S. and South Korean “soldiers would be fighting with little defense

against DPRK artillery, aerial bombardments and in an urban warfare environment polluted by 5,000 metric tons of DPRK chemical agents.”

Even if that artillery barrage and push into the South gave the North the initiative, there is no question, military planners all say, who would ultimately prevail in a second Korean War. The U.S. and South Korea have far too much firepower, and if Kim decided to go to war, that would be the end of his regime, whether he knows it or not.



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But this would not be a one-week walkover, like the first Gulf War against Saddam Hussein, when his forces were arrayed like clay pigeons in the Iraqi and Kuwaiti deserts, where they were easily destroyed by U.S. air power. Conventional thinking in the Pentagon is that it would be a four- to six-month conflict with high-intensity combat and many dead. In 1994, when President Bill Clinton contemplated the use of force to knock out the North’s nuclear weapons program, the then-commander of U.S.-Republic of Korea forces, Gary Luck, told his commander in chief that a war on the peninsula would likely result in 1 million dead and nearly \$1 trillion of economic damage.

The carnage would conceivably be worse now, given that the U.S. believes Pyongyang has 10 to 16 nuclear weapons. If the North could figure out a way to deliver one, why wouldn’t Kim go all in?

HAS THE messaging so far from the Trump administration regarding North Korea made war more or less likely? Trump was sobered by the Obama administration’s counsel that things with North Korea were becoming more dangerous. He initiated a comprehensive policy review shortly after taking office, which led to press reports that “all options” were on the table (including use of force) in dealing with North Korea. Too much may have been made of that, given that, in any formal review, all aspects of policy are scrutinized.

When President-elect Trump was told North Korea had claimed it had reached the “final stage of preparations to test-launch an intercontinental ballistic missile,” he tweeted, “It won’t happen.” Kellyanne Conway, counselor to the president, explained that Trump had sent a “clear warning” to North Korea and put Pyongyang “on notice.” She added that “the president of the United States will stand between them and missile capabilities.”

Shortly after taking office, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said the era of “strategic patience”—the Obama administration phrase for its policy—with the North was over. And



TOP GUN: Vice President Mike Pence looks out at North Korea from an observation post. Many say a pre-emptive strike by the U.S. could lead to a war that would kill a million people.



HOLDING THEIR BREATH: An anti-terrorism drill in Seoul. Many believe the South Korean capital would get hit hard in a war between the U.S. and Pyongyang.

even though McMaster said every option “short of war” was being considered, he also said a nuclear-capable North Korea “is unacceptable [and] so the president has asked us to be prepared to give him a full range of options to remove that threat to the American people and to our allies and partners in the region.” His use of the word *remove* seemed to imply a use of force and made the governments in Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing nervous.

Has Trump drawn a red line to use all means necessary to prevent North Korea from completing its intercontinental ballistic missile program? Or is he doing a “madman across the water” bluff in order to spook North Korea and instill some panic in the Chinese, hoping to prod the latter into using their economic leverage (85 percent of North Korea’s external trade is with China) to rein in Kim?

Former CIA analyst Klingner notes that, given the rapid pace of North Korea’s 2016 test program and the regime’s tendency to test a new president early, it might not be long before Trump gets reports of another North Korean long-range missile or nuclear test. This is when things could get very perilous. Another missile test does not constitute a crisis of the sort that should trigger another Korean War. It would, if anything, give the U.S. more leverage with China to tighten the economic noose around Pyongyang. Yet all the chatter about pre-emption—some of which has also come from Seoul—has prompted the DPRK leadership to

issue its own threats about pre-emption.

In a recent report widely read in the Pentagon and intelligence community, Klingner argued that the talk about pre-emption, and declarations that all options are on the table, needs to stop. “Advocacy of pre-emption both by North Korea and by the U.S. and its allies is destabilizing,” he wrote, and could lead to greater potential for either side to miscalculate. Pyongyang may not realize that the more it demonstrates and threatens to use its nuclear prowess, the more likely allied action becomes during a crisis.

“Each side could misinterpret the other’s intentions, thus fueling tension, intensifying a perceived need to escalate, and raising the risk of miscalculation, including pre-emptive attack,” Klingner continued. “Even a tactical military incident on the Korean Peninsula always has the potential for escalating to a strategic clash. With no apparent off-ramp on the highway to a crisis, the danger of a military clash on the Korean Peninsula is again rising.”

That is where we are now. As an alternative to making threats, several current and former diplomats, intelligence analysts and military officers say, reducing tensions now requires the steady, quiet deployment of additional military hardware to the region, as well as a behind-the-scenes application of Chinese diplomatic muscle from what many analysts believe to be an increasingly exasperated Beijing.

Those are the things that may get Kim Jong Un’s head straight. One miscalculation away from the next Korean War is way too close to for anyone’s comfort. **■**

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