

Hurtling Toward 'Fire and Fury'

Exclusive: Under congressional and media pressure to confront U.S. "adversaries," President Trump alarmed the world with rash rhetoric about inflicting "fire and fury" on North Korea, a frightening prospect, says Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

"Be prepared, there is a small chance that our horrendous leadership could unknowingly lead us into World War III." – Donald Trump, August 31, 2013

Like some demonic Hollywood director, President Trump keeps finding new ways to make us jump out of our seats, just when we think we've seen everything. On Tuesday, he outdid himself by twice pledging to meet any further North Korean threats to the United States "with fire and fury like the world has never seen."

His headline-grabbing comments were sufficiently incendiary that White House staffers rushed to reassure reporters (and the public) that the President was just improvising, not speaking from an approved script. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson insisted that the President simply meant to say that "the United States has the capability to fully defend itself from any attack . . . So the American people should sleep well at night."

People at home and around the world were rattled but not too alarmed, judging by the modest drop in stock prices on U.S. and foreign exchanges. North Korea responded to Trump's threat with a threat of its own to vaporize Guam, yet no war broke out. So far, leaders of both countries, like taunting schoolboys, seem content to lob only harsh rhetoric across the ocean, not fully armed missiles.

It's easy to discount Trump's bluster, based on his long history of practicing the art of "bullshit." Maybe he's just trying to make Chinese leaders nervous about his intentions, so they try a little harder to rein in Pyongyang. Surely he understands by now just how devastating a war with North Korea would be, right?

I'm not so sure. What increasingly keep me up at night are the uncontradicted claims of one of the GOP's leading foreign policy spokesmen, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, that Trump is ready and willing to launch a preemptive war "if [North Korea tries] to keep developing an ICBM with a nuclear weapon on top to hit the [U.S.] homeland."

North Korea isn't quite there yet, but some U.S. intelligence officials claim that Pyongyang has already produced a miniature nuclear warhead suitable for

delivery by missile, and its accelerated testing of long-range ballistic missiles means that the time is quickly drawing near when Kim Jong Un's regime will be able to put the United States at risk.

Tough-Guy Senators

Early in Trump's presidency, the influential Republican senator went to the President with a powerful message. Graham asked Trump, "Do you want on your resumé that during your presidency the North Koreans developed a missile that could hit the American homeland with a nuclear weapon on top of it?" Trump replied, according to Graham, "Absolutely not."

Graham advised President Trump that if all else failed, he must order a military strike. As Graham put it, "It would be terrible but the war would be over here (there), wouldn't be here. It would be bad for the Korean Peninsula. It would be bad for China. It would be bad for Japan, be bad for South Korea. It would be the end of North Korea. But what it would not do is hit America and the only way it could ever come to America is with a missile."

Speaking to NBC's "Today" show this month, Graham reiterated that Trump isn't bluffing about preparing an all-out strike against North Korea's nuclear program. "He has told me that. I believe him," Graham said. "If there's going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong Un], it will be over there. If thousands die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here. And he has told me that to my face."

Senate Armed Services Committee Chair John McCain, R-Arizona, was with Graham for the private meeting with Trump in April, and did not dispute his colleague's description of the conversation. He added only that a preemptive strike would be a "last" option.

Trump has said nothing to call Graham's account into question, either. Indeed, one of his first tweets of 2017 was a flat-out declaration, "North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won't happen!" Trump's national security adviser, H. R. McMaster, confirmed just this month that allowing North Korea to acquire functional nuclear-tipped ICBMs would be "intolerable, from the President's perspective."

The Trump-Graham doctrine recalls the George W. Bush administration's justification for preemptive war against Iraq in 2003 – with the key difference that North Korea's weapons of mass destruction are real, not mythical. Contrary to all evidence, Trump appears to believe that America's immense nuclear arsenal will be insufficient to deter North Korea from attacking the United States or

its allies.

North Korean Fears

North Korean leaders have consistently maintained that they want and need nuclear weapons only to deter a U.S. attack, not to start a war against the world's only superpower. Most experts on Korea agree. Former Secretary of Defense William Perry, who actually negotiated with Kim's predecessor in 2000, asserts that while the risks of inadvertent war are growing, North Korea has no intention of launching a surprise nuclear attack:

"I have studied North Korea for several decades and have had serious talks with many of their military and political leaders. . . . They are not crazy, as some people believe. North Korea is a pariah state and nearly alone in the world, but there is logic to the actions of its leadership. Fundamental to that logic is an overriding commitment to keeping their regime in power, to sustain the Kim dynasty. . . . and they understand that if they launch a nuclear attack, their country will be destroyed, and . . . it would end the Kim dynasty."

Experts also reject the Graham/Trump assumption that preemptive war with North Korea would be merely "bad" but manageable. Pyongyang has thousands of artillery aimed at Seoul, hundreds of rocket launchers, vast stocks of deadly chemical weapons, and as many as 60 nuclear warheads, which could render much of South Korea and Japan uninhabitable and rock the world's economy.

Defense Secretary James Mattis's gloomy warning that any conflict with North Korea would be "probably the worst kind of fighting in most people's lifetime," was almost certainly an understatement. As I have discussed previously, even without functioning ICBMs, Kim's regime already has the ability to wipe out major U.S. coastal cities simply by floating nuclear bombs into our harbors, hidden in container vessels.

President Trump's views on preemptive war are rejected not only by the experts, but by the majority of Americans. Fewer than a third of U.S. adults believe the situation in North Korea requires a military response, according to a new CBS poll, and 61 percent are rightfully uneasy about Trump's ability to handle the situation.

But what experts and most Americans think doesn't really matter. The U.S. military is undoubtedly ready to carry out an order from its commander-in-chief to attack North Korea. It holds massive training exercises every year for just such an eventuality. And the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Admiral Scott Swift, answered unequivocally "yes" when asked whether he would follow an order by President Trump to launch a nuclear attack against China, a vastly more

dangerous foe than North Korea.

So how, under these circumstances, do I get any sleep at all? Deep down, I suspect that Trump is too gutless to start an unnecessary war that will kill millions of people. I also have faith that South Korean President Moon Jae-in, a former human rights lawyer, will refuse to cooperate with a preemptive attack, making it difficult for U.S. forces to go it alone. I hope and pray that I'm right.

Jonathan Marshall is a regular contributor to Consortiumnews.com.
