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Defense Secretary James Mattis [remarked](#) recently that a war with North Korea would be “tragic on an unbelievable scale.” No kidding. “Tragic” doesn’t even begin to describe the [horrors](#) that would flow from such a conflict.

The Korean peninsula, all 85,270 square miles of it, is about the size of Idaho. It contains more soldiers (2.8 million, not counting reserves) and [armaments](#) (nearly 6,000 tanks, 31,000 artillery pieces, and 1,134 combat aircraft) than any other place on the planet. The armies of North and South Korea face each other across the Demilitarized Zone, or DMZ, and Seoul, South Korea’s capital, is a mere 35 miles away as the artillery shell flies. More than 25 million people inhabit that city’s greater metropolitan area, home to about half of South Korea’s population. Unsurprisingly, untold numbers of North Korean missiles and artillery pieces are trained on that city. Once the guns started firing, thousands of its denizens would undoubtedly die within hours. Of course, North Koreans, too, would be caught in an almost instant maelstrom of death.

And the war wouldn’t be a bilateral affair. South Korea hosts 28,500 American troops. In addition, there are some [200,000](#) American civilians in the country, most of them in Seoul. Many in both categories could be killed by North Korean attacks and the United States would, in turn, hit multiple targets in that country. Pyongyang might retaliate by firing missiles at Japan, where 39,000 American troops are stationed, concentrating on the network of American bases and command centers there, especially the U.S. Services Headquarters at Yokota Air Base near Tokyo.

And that’s without even considering the possible use of nuclear weapons. If anything, Mattis’s description is an understatement. And don’t assume that the danger of a Korean conflagration has passed now that President Trump has become trapped in the latest set of political scandals to plague his administration. Quite the opposite: a clash between North Korea and the United States might have become more probable precisely because the president is politically besieged.

Trump wouldn't be the first leader, confronted with trouble at home, to trigger a crisis abroad and then appeal for unity and paint critics as unpatriotic. Keep in mind, after all, that this is the man who has already warned of “ [a major, major war](#) ” with North Korea.

Trump vs. Kim

So far the coercive tactics Trump has used to compel North Korea to dismantle its nuclear weapons program and cease testing ballistic missiles have included [sanctions and asset freezes](#) , [military threats](#) , and shows of force -- both serious, as in the recent [Key Resolve](#) and [Operation Max Thunder](#) joint military exercises with South Korea, and farcical, as with a supposedly northward-bound naval “ [armada](#) ” that actually sailed in the opposite direction.

Such moves all involve the same presidential bet: that economic and military pressure can bend Pyongyang to his will. Other American presidents have, of course, taken the same approach and failed for decades now, which seems to matter little to Trump, even though he presents himself as a break-the-mold maverick ready to negotiate unprecedented deals with foreign leaders.

By now, this much ought to be clear, even to Trump: North Korea hasn't been cowed into compliance by Washington's warnings and military muscle flexing. In 2003, after multilateral diplomatic efforts to denuclearize North Korea ran aground, Pyongyang ditched the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and two years later declared that it possessed nuclear weapons. In October 2006, it detonated its first nuclear device, a one-kiloton bomb. Four other tests in May 2009, February 2013, January 2016, and September 2016, ranging in explosive yield from four to 10 kilotons, followed. Three of them occurred after the current North Korean leader, Kim Jong-un, came to power in April 2012.

A similar pattern holds for ballistic missiles, which North Korea has been [testing](#) since 1993.

The [numbers](#) have risen steadily under Kim Jong-un, from four tests in 2012 to 25 in 2016.

Clearly, the North's leaders reject the proposition that American approval is required for them to build nuclear bombs and ballistic missiles. Like his father, Kim Jong-il, and his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, the founder of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (or DPRK, North Korea's official name), Kim Jong-un is an ardent nationalist who regularly responds to threats by upping the ante. Trump's national security adviser, General H.R. McMaster, characterized Kim as "[unpredictable](#)." In reality, the Korean leader, like his father and grandfather before him, has been remarkably consistent: he has steadfastly refused to stop testing either nuclear weapons or their possible delivery systems, let alone "denuclearize" the Korean peninsula, as McMaster demanded.

Indeed, from Pyongyang's perspective Trump may be the unpredictable one. On one day, amid press reports that the Pentagon was considering a preventive strike using means ranging from Tomahawk cruise missiles to cyber attacks, the president [declared](#) ominously that North Korea "is a problem, a problem that will be taken care of." He followed up by

[warning](#)

Chinese President Xi Jinping, whom he was then hosting at his Mar-a-Lago estate, that if China wouldn't rein in Kim, the United States would act alone. Not so long after, Trump suddenly

[praised](#)

Kim, calling him a "pretty smart cookie," presumably impressed that the North Korean leader wasn't even 30 years old when he succeeded his father. On yet another day, the president

[announced](#)

that he would be "honored" to meet Kim under the right circumstances and would do so "absolutely."

The roller-coaster ride otherwise known as the presidency of Donald Trump has many people perplexed. Trump's boosters believe that the president's unpredictability gives him leverage against adversaries. But in the event of a military crisis on the Korean peninsula, Trump's pendulum-like behavior could lead North Korea's leaders to conclude that they had best prepare for the worst -- and so strike first. That prospect makes the Kim-Trump combination not just dangerous but quite possibly deadly.

Old Claims, New Possibilities

Standing in the way of a fresh policy toward North Korea are a set of assumptions beloved within the Washington Beltway and by the foreign policy establishment beyond it -- and rarely challenged in the mainstream media.

Perhaps the most common of them is that diplomacy and conciliation toward North Korea won't work because its leaders only respond to pressure. So pervasive and deeply rooted is this view that it makes fresh thinking about Pyongyang next to impossible.

Given the failure of both sanctions and saber rattling, however, a new approach would have to involve diplomacy (in case you've forgotten that word) and serious negotiations with the North. Here's one possible way to go that might, in fact, make a difference.

North Korea would agree, in principle, to dismantle its nuclear weapons installations, rejoin the NPT, and allow comprehensive inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to verify its compliance. Concurrently, the United States would pledge not to attack North Korea or topple its regime and to move toward normalization of political relations.

Major steps taken by North Korea on the path to denuclearization would be matched by cuts in American military forces in South Korea. Once Pyongyang delivered completely, the United States would remove all its forces and fully lift economic sanctions on the North.

The United States, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia would undertake to fund and, for some of its future energy needs, build new Light-Water Reactors (LWRs), which reduce the risk of bomb-grade plutonium production. These would be subject to regular inspections and electronic surveillance by the IAEA and all spent fuel would be transported out of North Korea. The dismantling of the North's nuclear facilities, verified by intermittent inspections and continuous electronic monitoring, would -- as in the nuclear deal with Iran -- prevent the production of weapons-grade plutonium (PU-239) or uranium (UR-235)

Once these steps were completed, both Koreas would begin to pull back their troops massed along the Demilitarized Zone and so create an even wider region free of weapons and troops between the two countries. They would agree not to reintroduce troops and armaments into the vacated areas and to allow monitoring by international observers. Over perhaps a 10-year span the two states would commit to additional military pullbacks plus reductions in the number

of weapons each possessed, focusing on retiring those most suited to offensive warfare.

If Trump is indeed prepared to meet with Kim, it should be to do a deal along these lines, not to deliver in person the sort of ultimatums that the North has rejected for years.

The Diplomacy-Won't-Work Trope

Typically, proposals like these are dismissed on the grounds that they combine the worst of all worlds: the appeasement of a despotic regime and reckless naïveté.

Let's start with the appeasement charge, the gist of which seems to be that Pyongyang's cruelties bar diplomatic engagement with it. This claim amounts to sanctimonious puffery and historical amnesia. The United States has, in various forms, supported a vast array of despotic regimes, including Greece during the brutal "regime of the colonels" (1967-74); Indonesia under Suharto (who presided over the slaughter of half a million people in 1965-1966); and Iraq under Saddam Hussein during the 1980s, when his government was gassing Kurds and razing their villages. And of course in South Korea there was the U.S.-backed government of President Syngman Rhee (1948-1960), whose security forces [killed](#) more than 100,000 people, 30,000 to 60,000 in the infamous 1948 [Cheju massacre](#) alone, as part of an effort to decimate any left-wing opposition in the country.