

United States: We Need a Mass Movement to Prevent Nuclear Conflict in the Korean Peninsula

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On August 2, US Sen. Lindsey Graham paraphrased President Donald Trump's stance on the prospect of conflict in the Korean Peninsula as follows: "If thousands die, they're going to die over there." Less than a week later, on August 8, President Trump responded to North Korea's latest missile test by threatening to unleash "fire and fury" against Pyongyang, raising alarms throughout the international community.

These statements were only the latest excerpts of the ongoing hostile dialog between North Korea and the United States since both parties signed an armistice 64 years ago. A peace treaty was never reached.

Will Trump's heightened rhetoric lead the Korean Peninsula to the brink of war anytime soon? Most likely not. As many analysts point out, deterrence still holds in the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, despite bellicose rhetoric on both sides. The United States knows that North Korea now has the capability and willingness to strike back if attacked. North Korea knows firsthand the overwhelming power of the United States, well proven in the devastation visited on the populace during the Korean War, when more than 30 percent of Koreans were either killed or injured.

However, without strong public protest against his aggressive rhetoric and a unified demand for peace, Trump and the more hawkish among his retinue may well feel empowered to channel his "fire and fury" rhetoric into actions leading to nuclear conflict in the Korean Peninsula. That is why there must be immediate mobilization to stem Trump's moves toward the warpath.

While a war is not imminent in the Korean Peninsula as a result of Trump's bluster, the real reason for alarm is not what the president has said, but rather what he has done since being elected.

Donald Trump has proved to be the most hawkish president in modern history. During the first six months of his presidency, the United States has escalated the bombing of Iraq and Syria to unprecedented levels. By July 21, 2017, according to Foreign Policy, the Trump administration had dropped close to 20,750 bombs, nearly 80 percent of Obama's total for all of 2016.

Trump's hawkish policies have resulted in devastating costs to Iraqi and Syrian civilians. A military campaign of "fire and fury" in the Korean Peninsula would also carry staggering human costs.

There are more than 75,000 US troops stationed in South Korea and Japan, along with more than 136,000 US civilians in South Korea. In addition to all the lives that would be lost in North Korea as a result of US military action, millions of South Korean lives and many thousands of American lives will be in the range of North Korean firepower. This alone should rule out the prospect of military action in the Korean Peninsula.

Nor can US-led UN sanctions on North Korea achieve an effective solution. The North Korean

regime has proven to be extremely resilient in enduring sanctions, the costs of which fall upon the most vulnerable of North Korea's citizens — sick people, elderly people, and women and children who play no part in Kim Jong-un's policies.

Moreover, time is running out. Even if sanctions are successfully implemented, it will take months for them to take effect, during which time North Korea can continue to develop its missile and nuclear programs, and the cycle of hostile and bellicose exchanges can lead further down the path to war.

During his recent phone call with Trump, South Korean President Moon Jae-in stressed that "South Korea can never accept a war erupting again on the Korean Peninsula," insisting that "the North Korean nuclear issue must be resolved in a peaceful, diplomatic manner through a close coordination between South Korea and the United States." Indeed, the only viable option to end the current standoff is diplomacy, best exemplified in concrete proposals such as the freeze-for-freeze dictum, which proposes that North Korea freeze its nuclear and missile testing in return for the United States and South Korea halting their annual military exercises. More than 60 percent of Americans, regardless of political affiliation, support direct negotiation between the United States and North Korea, a sentiment shared by 80 percent of South Koreans. According to the latest survey by Chicago Council on Global Affairs, "Military action ... as in past surveys, lacks public support. Overall, 28 percent of Americans favor sending US troops to destroy North Korea's nuclear facilities."

North Korea's recent advances in bolstering its deterrence capability are creating a structural condition of deterrence buttressed by a balance of power in the Korean Peninsula. While this development represents a potential game-changer in the region, it also creates a historic opportunity for President Trump to leverage diplomacy in order to strike a deal with North Korea, thereby achieving what no other US president has been able to. Without a mass public mobilization demanding peace, however, Trump may feel empowered to push toward a nuclear conflict rather than seizing this opportunity for diplomacy.

On August 10, a day after Trump's "fire and fury" threat, an emergency anti-war rally was held in front of the White House. Unfurling banners declaring, "no war," "reunification, not nuclear annihilation" and "who will keep us safe?" protesters called on the president to pursue diplomacy rather than conflict. H.K. Suh, the vice president of the National Association of Korean Americans, appealed to Trump to "stand down," warning that "one misstep could lead to catastrophe." Suh is one of hundreds of thousands of Korean-Americans fighting for a peaceful reunification of Korea. It's time for Koreans and Americans to unite in a people's movement of broad-based "fire and fury" against any attack on human security from any force in the Korean Peninsula.

Simone Chun

P.S.

* Truthout. Thursday, August 10, 2017:

<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/41577-we-need-a-mass-movement-to-prevent-nuclear-conflict-in-the-korean-peninsula>

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* Dr. Simone Chun has taught at Northeastern University in Boston, and served as an associate in research at Harvard University's Korea Institute. She is an active member of the Korea Peace Network, and a member of the steering committee of the Alliance of Scholars Concerned about Korea.