



# Kim Would Regret War

September 26, 2017 **James S. Robbins** *U.S. News & World Report*

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North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un seems bent on making it easier for the United States to go to war. If he draws first blood, it may be the last thing he ever does.

On Monday, North Korea's foreign minister Ri Yong Ho said that his country has "every right to make countermeasures, including the right to shoot down United States strategic bombers even when they are not inside the airspace border of our country." Pyongyang has reportedly moved interceptor aircraft closer to the flight path of U.S. bombers that have been patrolling North Korea's periphery. Ri said that attacking U.S. forces was legal since "it was the U.S. who first declared war on our country," apparently referring to statements from President Donald Trump.

In fact, a state of conflict has existed since United Nations Security Council Resolution 84 was adopted on July 7, 1950, after North Korea invaded South Korea. Hostilities in the Korean War ended with the 1953 armistice agreement that mandated "complete cessation of all hostilities in Korea by all armed force." However, the planned subsequent final peace agreement was never reached, and the armistice is the principal legal barrier to this cold war turning hot.

The North Korea situation in general presents U.S. policymakers with a difficult challenge. Pyongyang seems committed to pursuing nuclear weapon and missile programs that pose increasing threats to the United States and the world. Economic sanctions and diplomatic measures have been ineffective in blunting North Korea's arms buildup. However, resorting to military action is problematic given the close proximity of South Korea's capital, Seoul, to the North Korean border, and the potential for Beijing to intervene on Pyongyang's behalf as it did the first time around. A conventional war could be devastating, and might escalate to the nuclear level. This risk matrix has effectively deterred the United States from taking overt military steps, but it has also allowed North Korea to become more threatening, which raises the cost of inaction.

This configuration would change significantly if Kim gave the order to attempt to shoot down U.S. or allied aircraft operating outside his borders. There is precedent for him doing so; in April 1969, North Korean MiG-17 fighters swarmed and downed a U.S. Navy EC-121 surveillance aircraft operating in international airspace over the Sea of Japan, killing 31 American servicemen. President Richard Nixon, who was disengaging from the Vietnam War and seeking a diplomatic opening at the time with China's then-leader Mao Zedong, chose not to retaliate. Perhaps Kim thinks that if his grandfather got away with it, he could, too.

Yet mistakes are made when starting wars. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, was one such strategic misstep. An arguably greater error was when Germany declared war on the United States four days later, which brought the United States fully into the war in the European theater of World War II and broke the isolationist logjam which had been hindering full materiel support for Great Britain and the Soviet Union. America's enemies in Tokyo and Berlin gave the U.S. a clear course of action, and suffered a devastating response.

Unilaterally attacking American or allied forces would be a similar grave error of judgment on Kim's part. It would be a definitive act of war. Trump is not distracted the way Nixon was. He has already threatened serious consequences - "fire and fury like the world has never seen" - should North Korea initiate the use of force. Last month, U.S. Defense Secretary James Mattis said "that's called war, if they shoot at us," after which it would be "game on." Taking down an American aircraft would lend urgency to the endless North Korea policy debate. It would clarify the situation. And whatever else happened, it would not end well for the Kim dynasty.

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