

Pentagon

A viable military option: Countering North Korea's weapons program [Commentary]

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It is difficult to turn on the news or surf the web without seeing what a mess the world faces in North Korea. In a troubled world, it may be the most dangerous mess out there. North Korea has a history of provocations, an unpredictable and supposedly crazy young leader, and nuclear weapons. The next Korean War, if there is one, could dwarf Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan in the magnitude of tragedy and disastrous global impact. North Korean missile and nuclear tests, coupled with strong rhetoric from both North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and U.S. President Donald Trump, have the region and the world on watch.

As Trump met with Chinese President Xi Jinping in Florida recently, it was with that

dangerous backdrop. Trump is expected to push China to endorse powerful economic sanctions on North Korea over its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. He told the Financial Times that "if China is not going to solve North Korea, we will." This follows U.S. Secretary of State Tillerson's pronouncement that it's time for a "new approach" to North Korea.

Key US officials have implied that the new approach could include military action. Military action is usually assumed to be some sort of attack on North Korean military facilities, particularly those supporting Kim's nuclear ambitions. While that option must stay on the table as a deterrent, a limited strike is highly unlikely to achieve significant military objectives against hardened targets, especially those deeply underground. Such an attack could prompt a deadly response from North Korea's leader.

There is, however, a viable military option — a defensive option — that has not received the attention it deserves. The U.S. can significantly strengthen the missile defenses protecting Hawaii by deploying an operational missile system. Timely investment in a combination of current capabilities could protect Hawaii from the North Korean (and other) threats quickly and affordably. A viable missile defense system for the Hawaiian islands — the U.S. territory most at risk to a North Korean strike — would do more than provide needed protection. By significantly decreasing the risk to Kim's growing but rudimentary capability, it would make such action less attractive to the dictator. There are two particularly viable options to consider: Aegis Ashore with sufficient SM-3 interceptor inventory and the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system. These capabilities are available to combatant commanders today.

That's a stark difference to other options currently under consideration, such as the Missile Defense Agency's proposed Homeland Discrimination Radar Hawaii. This system may be of value someday, but there is not time to create a new system in hopes of countering or deterring North Korea. Readily available, proven capability is a must.

Moving swiftly, Trump would make it clear he is serious about taking a new approach to North Korea. Deploying proven, cost-effective capability would it make it clear Trump is

being prudent with the Pentagon's many important priorities.

As a defensive move, deployment of these capabilities would decrease, not exacerbate tensions, and thus reassure Chinese and other leaders that the U.S. is not seeking to provoke conflict. Nor would it feed the North's foundational myth of victimization. Finally, as a unilateral move, it would not be hostage to progress in denuclearization or approval from a host-nation ally.

Of course, there are other nonmilitary actions that should be part of Trump's new approach. These include replacing the post-war armistice with a permanent peace agreement, aggressively working with the world community to address starvation and human rights abuses, cooperating with China to moderate North Korean behavior, supporting normalization of North Korea's maritime boundaries, and continuing to use of sanctions to limit the Kim regime's ability to pursue weapons development.

All of these nonmilitary actions will take time — operationalizing missile defense for Hawaii is the one move that could have an immediate, positive effect.

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