



The Costs of Preventive War with North Korea

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The U.S. Department of Defense has said that completely destroying North Korea's nuclear program would require a full ground invasion.¹ The potential human, economic, and strategic costs of this war would be catastrophic.

Human costs: War with North Korea would put millions of lives at risk

- **American soldiers would be at risk:** Roughly 27,000 U.S. military troops and civilian personnel live in South Korea, and roughly 51,000 live in Japan.² The United States might need to put an additional 690,000 U.S. troops on the line in the case of war.³ And war wouldn't be quick—the North Korean army is nearly 25 times the size the Iraqi Army was in 2003.
- **Millions of civilian lives would be at risk:** South Korea is home to 51 million people, including 150,000 U.S. citizens.⁴ With conventional munitions alone, North Korea could kill upwards of 300,000 people in South Korea in a matter of days.⁵ Tokyo, which is within range of North Korea's missiles, is home to nearly 40 million people.⁶ Guam and Hawaii, home to millions of Americans, are also at risk. And 25 million North Koreans—upon whose suffering the North Korean nuclear program has been built—could be decimated by a war.

Economic costs: The repercussions of war are enormous

- **Major world economies would be disrupted:** The United States, China, and Japan are the world's three largest economies. South Korea is also the world's 11th-largest economy, and the East Asia Pacific region overall comprises 30 percent of the world's economy.⁷
- **Global trade would be seriously inhibited:** In 2016, South Korea was the United States' 6th-largest goods-trading partner, and Japan was its 4th-largest.⁸ War could create worldwide shortages in ships, semiconductors, and liquid crystal displays—all goods of which South Korea is a leading producer.⁹
- **War is expensive:** From 9/11 through 2016, U.S. military engagements and homeland security to prevent terrorism have cost taxpayers roughly \$4.4 trillion.¹⁰ New military operations will only add to this number, and rebuilding South Korea in the aftermath of war could add 30 percent of gross domestic product to the national debt.¹¹ The costs of fixing North Korea's economy alone could top \$1 trillion.¹²

Strategic costs: The United States would cede its place in the world

- **Preventive war would destroy alliances:** South Korea and Japan, treaty allies of the United States, do not want the United States to launch a preventive strike because they know that their nations would bear the brunt of the economic and human costs. Should the United States go ahead with a preventive strike that puts its allies at risk, American credibility—and its alliances—would be destroyed.
- **Rival powers would take advantage of the situation:** China will almost certainly enter the fray on the Korean peninsula, likely securing North Korea's nuclear sites and potentially occupying the country. It could also take advantage of the United States' focus on the peninsula and lost credibility to pursue its strategic aims related to the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan. Russia, which shares a land border with North Korea, is also likely to play chaos agent in a wartime scenario.
- **The opportunity costs are high:** Time and money spent fighting on the Korean peninsula means time and money not spent on other critical U.S. security interests such as its ongoing military engagements in the Middle East; countering destabilizing Iranian behavior; pushing back against challenges from China and Russia; countering violent extremism; and building a free and open Indo-Pacific region.

Endnotes

- 1 Jesse Johnson, "Pentagon says securing North Korean nukes would require U.S. ground invasion," *The Japan Times*, November 5, 2017, available at <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/11/05/asia-pacific/pentagon-says-securing-north-korean-nukes-require-u-s-ground-invasion/#.WqlkchxG2UI>.
- 2 Authors' analysis of September 2017 data from Defense Manpower Data Center, "Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country (Updated Quarterly)," available at https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/dwp_reports.jsp (last accessed March 2018).
- 3 Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense, "2016 Defense White Paper" (2016), available at http://www.mnd.go.kr/user/mndEN/upload/pblictn/PBLICTNE-BOOK_201705180357180050.pdf.
- 4 Authors' analysis of 2016 data from Korean Statistical Information Service, "Population, Households and Housing Units," available at http://kosis.kr/statHtml/statHtml.do?orgId=101&tblId=DT_1IN1602&conn_path=I2&language=en (last accessed March 2018); Korean Immigration Service, "Churipguk Oeuginjeongchaek Tonggye-wolbo" (Monthly Report on Policies Related to Foreigners Entering and Leaving the Country) (2016), available at http://www.immigration.go.kr/doc_html/attach/imm/f2016/20160830263386_1_1.hwp.files/Sections1.html.
- 5 Kathleen J. McInnis and others, "The North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Military Options and Issues for Congress," (Washington: Congressional Research Service, 2017), available at <https://fas.org/spp/crs/nuke/R44994.pdf>.
- 6 United Nations, "The World's Cities in 2016" (2016), available at http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/urbanization/the_worlds_cities_in_2016_data_booklet.pdf.
- 7 The World Bank, "GDP (current US\$)," available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD> (last accessed March 2018).
- 8 Office of the United States Trade Representative, "U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement," available at <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/korus-fta> (last accessed March 2018); Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Japan," available at <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/japan-korea-apec/japan> (last accessed March 2018).
- 9 Will Martin, "Here's what a war between North Korea and the US could do to the global economy," *Business Insider*, August 9, 2017, available at <http://www.businessinsider.com/war-between-north-korea-and-usa-global-economy-impact-2017-8>.
- 10 Neta C. Crawford, "United States Budgetary Costs of Post-9/11 Wars Through FY2018" (Providence, RI: Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs at Brown University, 2017), available at http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/news/Costs%20of%20U.S.%20Post-9_11%20NC%20Crawford%20FINAL%20.pdf.
- 11 Nyshka Chandran, "War with North Korea could increase smartphone prices, disrupt global trade and widen US debt," *CNBC*, May 17, 2017, available at <https://www.cnbc.com/2017/05/17/war-with-north-korea-could-hike-smartphone-prices-slow-global-trade-and-increase-us-debt.html>.
- 12 Bruce W. Bennett, "Uncertainties in the North Korean Nuclear Threat," (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), available at https://www.rand.org/pubs/documented_briefings/DB589.html.