



Myths About North Korea

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To build a case for preventive war against North Korea, the Trump administration continues to tout myths as fact. Many of these myths are just that—myths.

Myth 1: Kim Jong-un is irrational and therefore undeterrable

“Classical deterrence theory, how does that apply to a regime like the regime in North Korea?”
—U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster¹

- **Experts consider Kim Jong-un a rational actor:** The American intelligence community believes Kim Jong-un is a rational actor whose main motivation is regime survival.² Kim Jong-un knows that his regime would be destroyed should he launch a nuclear weapon with the intent to strike; he is not going to recklessly endanger his own safety by attacking the United States.
- **Even if he is irrational, attacking him is bad idea:** If Kim Jong-un is an irrational actor, it would be unwise for the Trump administration to believe that he would not react irrationally to a preventive strike by launching a disproportionate strike against the United States.

Myth 2: An intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) is a game changer

“[An ICBM] is a bit of a game changer for us.”
—Commander of U.S. Forces Korea Gen. Vincent Brooks³

- **The strategic calculus has not changed:** Having an ICBM does not change the underlying tenets of deterrence: North Korea knows that if it attacks the United States or any of its allies, the United States will retaliate—regardless of whether North Korea targeted Seoul, Guam, or Washington, D.C. An ICBM can only decouple the United States and its allies if the United States allows it to. Additionally, one cannot assume that North Korea does not already have an ICBM that can be outfitted with a nuclear warhead.

Myth 3: American policy has failed

“Our country has been unsuccessfully dealing with North Korea for 25 years, giving billions of dollars & getting nothing. Policy didn’t work!” —U.S. President Donald Trump⁴

- **America’s policy has deterred North Korea since the end of the Korean War:** Since the end of the Korean War, the United States and South Korea have been deterring North Korea. While there have been provocations, North Korea has not pursued

reunification by force. The United States has nearly 24,000 active duty troops stationed in South Korea, and the South Korean army has over 600,000 troops.⁵ Deterrence has kept Americans and their allies safe for over 60 years.

- **South Korea is thriving:** While North Korea can barely support and feed its people and has teetered on the brink of collapse, American policy has helped South Korea to become one of the world's largest economies and most vibrant democracies.

Myth 4: Time is on North Korea's side

"Time is running out." —U.S. National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster⁶

- **North Korea is weak:** Sanctions are cutting off North Korea's access to hard currency. Information flows into the country are increasing. North Korea's key protector, China, is becoming increasingly frustrated with the country.⁷ Furthermore, North Korea is small and vulnerable when compared with the capabilities of the United States and its allies.

Endnotes

1 ABC News, "This Week' Transcript 8-13-17: Lt. Gen. H. R. McMaster, Anthony Scaramucci," August 13, 2017 available at <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/week-transcript-13-17-lt-gen-mcmaster-anthony/story?id=49177024>.

2 Zachary Cohen, "CIA: North Korean leader Kim Jong Un isn't crazy," CNN Politics, October 6, 2017, available at <https://www.cnn.com/2017/10/05/politics/cia-kim-jong-un-intelligence-profile/index.html>.

3 Bill Gertz, "General: North Korean ICBM Test Was 'Game Changer,'" *The Washington Free Beacon*, July 26, 2017, available at <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/general-north-korean-icbm-test-game-changer/>.

4 Ken Bredemeir, "Trump: US Policy on North Korea Has Failed for 25 Years," *Voice of America*, October 9, 2017, available at <https://www.voanews.com/a/trump-north-korea/4062522.html>.

5 U.S. Department of Defense, *Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country (Updated Quarterly) September 2017* (2017), Location Country Report table, available at [The Korea Herald, January 22, 2018, available at <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20180122000830>.](https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/dwp/rest/download?fileName=DMDC_Website_Location_Report_1709.xlsx&groupName=milRegionCountry;Jun-suk Yeo,)

6 Zachary Fryer-Biggs, "Time Running Out' to Avoid War With North Korea, U.S. Official Says," *Newsweek*, December 12, 2017, available at <http://www.newsweek.com/time-running-out-avoid-war-north-korea-us-official-says-745914>.

7 John Pomfret, "The real reason China won't turn against North Korea," *The Washington Post*, September 8, 2017, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/global-opinions/wp/2017/09/08/the-real-reason-china-wont-turn-against-north-korea/?utm_term=.9bb6ef541a43.