

# Evaluating the North Korean Crisis

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Timothy Zebell  
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“North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States. They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.”<sup>1</sup> This chilling statement by President Donald Trump to reporters on August 8, 2017 evoked nuclear options only two days after the 72<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of Hiroshima. Hours later, the undaunted Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) threatened to launch four medium to long-range ballistic missiles into the sea to create “an enveloping fire” around the U.S. territory of Guam.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, they issued a statement threatening pre-emptive war, “Will only the U.S. have option called ‘pre-emptive war’ as is claimed by it? It is a daydream for the U.S. to think that its mainland is an invulnerable Heavenly kingdom. The U.S. should clearly face up to the fact that the ballistic rockets of the Strategic Force of the K.P.A. are now on constant standby, facing the Pacific Ocean and pay deep attention to their azimuth angle for launch.”<sup>3</sup>

On August 11, President Donald Trump tweeted, “Military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely. Hopefully Kim Jong Un will find another path!”<sup>4</sup> Also, the Chinese state-run *Global Times* published an editorial calling upon the government to make clear to the United States and North Korea that “when their actions jeopardize China’s interests, China will respond with a firm hand. China should also make clear that if North Korea launches missiles that threaten US soil first and the US retaliates, China will stay neutral. If the US and South Korea carry out strikes and try to overthrow the North Korean regime and change the political pattern of the Korean Peninsula, China will prevent them from doing so.”<sup>5</sup> Finally, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis cautioned, “The DPRK should cease any consideration of actions that would lead to the end of its regime and the destruction of its people.”<sup>6</sup> He also warned that if North Korea fires at the U.S., then “it’s game on”, and that “it could escalate into war very quickly ... yes, that’s called war, if they shoot at us.”<sup>7</sup>

These statements have provoked a flurry of agitated reporting which leaves the viewer feeling that the United States is on the brink of a potentially nuclear war with North Korea. How did we get to this point? What is happening? How concerned should we be? And most importantly, how should we respond as Christians?

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, “Trump Threatens ‘Fire and Fury’ Against North Korea if It Endangers U.S.”

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Merica, “Trump Warns North Korea: US Military ‘Locked and Loaded’.”

<sup>5</sup> “Reckless Game Over the Korean Peninsula Runs Risk of Real War.”

<sup>6</sup> “Statement by Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis.”

<sup>7</sup> “Mattis: If North Korea Fires Missile at US, It’s ‘Game On’.”

## How did we get to this point?

The Korean Armistice Agreement halted the bloodshed of the Korean War which cost the United States 36,000 American soldiers and wounded another 100,000.<sup>8</sup> Signed on July 27, 1953, the armistice was designed to suspend hostilities while a formal peace treaty could be negotiated. Sixty-four years later, no such peace treaty has been signed.<sup>9</sup> As such, the Korean War has never formally ended, leaving the North Koreans with no assurances that they will not be attacked.

Chief among the obstacles impeding a formal peace treaty has been the United States' insistence that North Korea commit to denuclearization and halt their missile tests before any such negotiations begin.<sup>10</sup> To accomplish this, successive American presidents have opted for a diplomatic solution. In October of 1994, then President Bill Clinton, with the aid of former president Jimmy Carter, negotiated a deal known as the Agreed Framework with the incoming leader Kim Jong Il.<sup>11</sup> While the deal was politically advantageous, allowing the President to proclaim a major foreign policy success weeks before the mid-term election, the agreement also bolstered the political capital of Kim Jong Il, a man whom the United States had regularly denounced as "a terrorist, a supplier of missile technology to Iran and a dictator".<sup>12</sup>

In 1993, the International Atomic Energy Agency sought to inspect two of North Korea's nuclear waste storage sites.<sup>13</sup> In response, North Korea kicked out the international inspectors and threatened to withdraw from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.<sup>14</sup> The North Koreans had also built a 5-megawatt reactor and plutonium processing plant and had separated enough plutonium from spent fuel to build multiple nuclear weapons, according to Joshua Pollack, a senior research associate at the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies.<sup>15, 16</sup> Furthermore, they were constructing a 50-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon and a 200-megawatt plant at Taechon which they claimed were for the purpose of generating electricity.<sup>17</sup>

The Agreed Framework mandated that the North Koreans stop construction of the new reactors, take their completed reactor offline, and remove from the country the spent fuel from their 5-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon.<sup>18</sup> In exchange, the United States would facilitate and help finance the construction of two 1,000-megawatt light water nuclear power reactors and would help supply 500,000 metric tons of heavy-fuel oil to help compensate for the electricity-generating capacity that the Koreans were sacrificing by freezing their reactors.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> "Korean War Costs High in Men, Misery, Money."

<sup>9</sup> Dobbins, "End the Korean War, Finally."

<sup>10</sup> Dobbins, "End the Korean War, Finally."

<sup>11</sup> Gillin, "Viral Image Wrongly Blames Bill Clinton for Giving North Korea the Means to Make Nuclear Weapons."

<sup>12</sup> Sanger, "Clinton Approves a Plan to Give Aid to North Koreans."

<sup>13</sup> "North Korea Nuclear Timeline Fast Facts."

<sup>14</sup> Gillin, "Viral Image Wrongly Blames Bill Clinton for Giving North Korea the Means to Make Nuclear Weapons."

<sup>15</sup> "The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance."

<sup>16</sup> Gillin, "Viral Image Wrongly Blames Bill Clinton for Giving North Korea the Means to Make Nuclear Weapons."

<sup>17</sup> "The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance."

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

At the time, Clinton policy wonks claimed that light water reactors could not be used to create weapons. As such, President Clinton announced, “North Korea will freeze and then dismantle its nuclear program”.<sup>20</sup> He also assured, “This agreement will help achieve a longstanding and vital American objective - an end to the threat of nuclear proliferation on the Korean Peninsula.”<sup>21</sup> However, Henry Sokolski, head of the Non-Proliferation Policy Education Center in Washington, has revealed that light water reactors (LWRs) can produce weapons. According to Sokolski, “LWRs could be used to produce dozens of bombs’ worth of weapons-grade plutonium in both North Korea and Iran. This is true of all LWRs – a depressing fact U.S. policymakers have managed to block out.”<sup>22</sup>

Despite the efforts to appease North Korea, they accelerated their enriched uranium efforts, which technically wasn’t a direct violation of the Agreed Framework.<sup>23</sup> Years later, during the 2002 State of the Union Address, then President George W. Bush labeled North Korea, Iran, and Iraq an “axis of evil” who posed a grave and growing threat due to their efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction.<sup>24</sup> Later that same year, the Bush Administration revealed that North Korea had admitted to operating a uranium enrichment program which could be used to build nuclear weapons, therefore, violating their agreement to forgo acquiring such weapons.<sup>25</sup> It appears that there was never a point when North Korea ceased its nuclear weapons program.<sup>26</sup> North Korea denied the charge, but the U.S. and its KEDO allies suspended its shipments of heavy-fuel oil to North Korea.<sup>27, 28</sup>

On January 10, 2003, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, saying, “Though we pull out of the N.P.T., we have no intention to produce nuclear weapons and our nuclear activities at this stage will be confined only to peaceful purposes such as the production of electricity.”<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the North Korean ambassador warned the United Nations that any attempt by the Security Council to impose sanctions on North Korea because of their nuclear program would be considered a “declaration of war.”<sup>30</sup> The next month, in February, 2003, North Korea reactivated its 5-megawatt reactor in Yongbyon. Two months later, North Korea declared that it was in possession of nuclear weapons.<sup>31</sup>

The voiding of the Framework Agreement spawned the Six Party Talks, which included North Korea, the United States, South Korea, China, Russia, and Japan.<sup>32</sup> These talks eventually secured an agreement by North Korea to abandon its entire nuclear program in exchange for energy

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<sup>20</sup> David, “Bill Clinton on Virtues of North Korean Nuclear Deal - History Repeats Itself.”

<sup>21</sup> Sanger, “Clinton Approves a Plan to Give Aid to North Koreans.”

<sup>22</sup> Watson, “Who Gave North Korea Nukes in the First Place?”

<sup>23</sup> Gillin, “Viral Image Wrongly Blames Bill Clinton for Giving North Korea the Means to Make Nuclear Weapons.”

<sup>24</sup> “North Korea Nuclear Timeline Fast Facts.”

<sup>25</sup> “The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance.”

<sup>26</sup> “You Can Thank Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton for North Korea’s Nukes.”

<sup>27</sup> “The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance.”

<sup>28</sup> KEDO stands for Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization.

<sup>29</sup> Mydans, “North Korea Assailed for Withdrawing from Arms Treaty.”

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> “North Korea Nuclear Timeline Fast Facts.”

<sup>32</sup> “The U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework at a Glance.”

assistance and economic cooperation.<sup>33</sup> This, however, was short-lived. After test firing long-range missiles in July of 2006, the United Nations Security Council passed a resolution demanding that North Korea suspend the program.<sup>34</sup> Three months later, North Korea claimed to have successfully tested its first nuclear weapon which incited a broad array of additional U.N. sanctions.<sup>35</sup>

Once again, in 2007, North Korea agreed to deactivate its main nuclear reactor in exchange for an aid package worth \$400 million.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, they signed an agreement to begin disabling their nuclear weapons facilities.<sup>37</sup> However, North Korea missed its deadline to disable its weapons facilities.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, on October 11, 2008, North Korea was removed from the United States' list of states that sponsor terrorism.<sup>39</sup>

The Six Party Talks collapsed in 2008 when North Korea refused to allow international inspectors unrestricted access to their suspected nuclear sites.<sup>40</sup> Then, on May 25, 2009, North Korea announced that it had conducted a second nuclear test which incited further U.N. sanctions.<sup>41</sup> In 2010, North Korea was reported to have constructed a new nuclear enrichment facility.

At the end of 2011, the Six Party Talks were reinstated under the new Korean leadership of Kim Jong Un, and in 2012, North Korea agreed to pause its long-range missile tests, along with the bulk of its nuclear program, in exchange for food aid.<sup>42</sup> Less than a year later, North Korea reinstated these programs, declaring the United States to be “the sworn enemy of the Korean people.”<sup>43</sup> On February 12, 2013, North Korea conducted its third nuclear test which resulted in additional U.N. sanctions.<sup>44</sup>

On March 30, 2014, tensions escalated when North Korea prepared for another nuclear test. The next day, they fired hundreds of shells across the border into the sea near South Korea. South Korea retaliated by firing 300 shells into North Korean waters and mobilized their jets.<sup>45</sup> North Korea continued its aggressive posturing, boasting that they possessed the missile capacity to strike the United States mainland, miniaturize nuclear warheads that could fit onto ballistic missiles, and the successful development and testing of a hydrogen bomb.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, they claimed to have detonated a nuclear warhead and threatened to soon test an intercontinental ballistic missile.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the United States largely dismissed these claims, responding with skepticism.<sup>48</sup> In fact,

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<sup>33</sup> “North Korea Nuclear Timeline Fast Facts.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> “North Korea Nuclear Timeline Fast Facts.”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

throughout then President Barack Obama's administration, the U.S. scaled back its missile defense systems.<sup>49, 50</sup>

In June 2017, Otto Warmier, an American college student who was detained in North Korea and tortured for 17 months, was returned to the U.S. severely brain damaged and in a vegetative state. He died days later.<sup>51</sup> On July 4, 2017, North Korea claimed to have successfully tested an intercontinental ballistic missile that could "reach anywhere in the world."<sup>52</sup> On August 5, 2017, President Donald Trump's administration spearheaded a unanimous United Nations Security Council vote to impose further sanctions on North Korea, estimated to cost them up to \$1 billion annually in lost trade revenue.<sup>53</sup> Two days later, U.S. spy satellites detected North Korea moving anti-ship cruise missiles onto a patrol boat.<sup>54</sup> In response to a reporter's question on August 8, President Donald Trump warned that North Korea would be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen if it continues to threaten the United States.<sup>55</sup> In response, North Korea threatened the U.S. territory of Guam, where 163,000 U.S. citizens reside, and a key U.S. Air Force base is located.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, the Strategic Force of the North Korean People's Army threatened a pre-emptive ballistic missile strike against the United States mainland.<sup>57</sup>

## What is happening?

"Although shooting stopped in 1953, Pyongyang insists that the Korean War never ended. It maintains as an official policy goal the reunification of the Korean peninsula under the Kim dynasty."<sup>58</sup> Because of this, North Korea is desperately pursuing a nuclear weapons program designed to "repel" an invasion by inflicting massive casualties in the early days of conflict.<sup>59</sup> Regardless of the armistice, North Korea is still a nation at war.

Despite this mentality, the world does not want a war with North Korea. Aside from the casualties and cost of war, any invasion of North Korea must include a plan to rebuild the country after it is defeated. However, North Korea's society, government, infrastructure, and technology are abysmal. According to *Business Insider*, "North Korea's 25 million citizens live under an oppressive, totalitarian government that freely detains or even puts to death citizens that stray from official messaging in any way. Simply listening to outside media not sanctioned by the state can result in death."<sup>60</sup> Likewise, *Liberty in North Korea* has noted that there is no freedom of movement, speech,

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<sup>49</sup> Bell, "Obama's North Korean and Iranian Missile Defense Trajectories: Course Corrections; Russia Re-Set Dud."

<sup>50</sup> Heinrichs, "The Perils of U.S. Missile Defense."

<sup>51</sup> Grinberg, "McCain: North Korea 'Murdered' Former Detainee Otto Warmier."

<sup>52</sup> "North Korea Nuclear Timeline Fast Facts."

<sup>53</sup> Taylor, "What the New U.N. Sanctions on North Korea Mean."

<sup>54</sup> Tomlinson, "US Spy Satellites Detect North Korea Moving Anti-Ship Cruise Missiles to Patrol Boat."

<sup>55</sup> DeYoung, "Trump Threatens 'Fire and Fury' in Response to North Korean Threats."

<sup>56</sup> Baker, "Trump Threatens 'Fire and Fury' Against North Korea if It Endangers U.S."

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Bowden, "How to Deal with North Korea."

<sup>59</sup> Lewis, "North Korea is Practicing for Nuclear War."

<sup>60</sup> Lockie, "What North Koreans Really Think of Their Supreme Leader."

information, or religion. Instead, there is forced leadership adulation, chronic food shortages, dismal public health, political apartheid, political prison camps, collective punishment, public executions, a refugee crisis, and sex trafficking.<sup>61</sup>

Even before the devastation of war, North Korea is a nation bursting with social and political nightmares for which no nation wishes to be responsible. Similarly, no nation wants to import these problems into their country. Nations such as China, South Korea, Russia, and Japan fear the wave of refugees that is likely to result from a military conflict with North Korea.

Furthermore, a war with North Korea would almost certainly kill tens of thousands of people. U.S. intelligence agencies have estimated that North Korea's nuclear arsenal likely includes up to 60 nuclear weapons.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, Fox News has reported, "Equipped with 20,000 artillery pieces, 1,000 short- and medium-range missiles, 70 submarines, more than 400 patrol/missile boats and 563 combat aircraft, the Hermit Kingdom's forces are poised to do maximum damage in a sneak attack against South Korea."<sup>63</sup>

The world's most densely populated city of Seoul is located a mere 30 miles from the Korean border.<sup>64</sup> Housing 25 million people, "Seoul's population density is almost twice that of New York City, four times higher than Los Angeles and eight times higher than the density of Rome."<sup>65</sup> In nearly every war scenario, an attack against North Korea will provoke an attack against Seoul before anything can be done to prevent it. In 2003, *TIME* reported, "Its conventional artillery capability would allow North Korea to flatten Seoul in the first half-hour of any confrontation."<sup>66</sup>

President Donald Trump inherited a foreign policy mess which has been compounded through years of appeasement, kicking the can down the road, empty threats, and inconsistent approaches. *The Atlantic* reported, "In the more than four decades since Richard Nixon held office, the U.S. has tried to control North Korea by issuing threats, conducting military exercises, ratcheting up diplomatic sanctions, leaning on China, and most recently, it seems likely, committing cybersabotage."<sup>67</sup> Today it is generally accepted that there are four possible approaches to dealing with North Korea: A pre-emptive military strike, diplomatic and economic pressure, assassination of Kim Jong Un, and acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear state.<sup>68</sup> There are no good options as each of these approaches risk triggering a doomsday scenario.

President Donald Trump appears to favor the route of first attempting diplomatic and economic pressure, but being willing to move to a pre-emptive military strike if this fails. This has been his position for decades. In 1999, he told CNN's Wolf Blitzer, "You go in; you start negotiating. And if you don't stop them from doing, you'll have to take rather drastic actions. Because if you don't take

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<sup>61</sup> "The People's Challenges."

<sup>62</sup> Warrick, "North Korea Now Making Missile-Ready Nuclear Weapons, U.S. Analysts Say."

<sup>63</sup> Wallace, "North Korea's Army: 1.2M Men, obsolete Equipment and Nukes."

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> "Seoul Population 2017."

<sup>66</sup> Karon, "North Korea Planning a Nuke Test?"

<sup>67</sup> Bowden, "How to Deal with North Korea."

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

them now, you're going to be in awfully big trouble in five years from now when they have more missiles than we do."<sup>69</sup> In that interview, he advocated the possibility of a unilateral pre-emptive military strike against North Korea's nuclear reactors, and he noted that such action is the only thing that North Korea fears.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, in a 1999 interview with Tim Russert, the moderator of NBC's *Meet the Press*, Trump said:<sup>71</sup>

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First, I'd negotiate. I'd negotiate like crazy. And I'd make sure that we tried to get the best deal possible. These people in three or four years are going to be having nuclear weapons. They're going to have those weapons pointed all over the world, and specifically at the United States. And wouldn't you be better off solving this really potentially unbelievable [problem]. ... And wouldn't it be good to sit down and really negotiate something? And ideally really negotiate something. Now, if that negotiation doesn't work, you better solve the problem now than solve it later, Tim. And you know it, and every politician knows it, and nobody wants to talk about it. Jimmy Carter, who I really like, I mean, he went over there. It was so soft. These people are laughing at us. ... Do you know that this country went out and gave them nuclear reactors, free fuel for 10 years? We virtually tried to bribe them into stopping, and they're continuing to do what they're doing. And they're laughing at us. They think we're a bunch of dummies. I'm saying that we have to do something to stop. ... Do you want to do it in five years when they have warheads all over the place, every one of them pointing to New York City, to Washington, and every one of our—is that when you want to do it? Or do you want to do something now?

After unsuccessfully leaning upon China to negotiate with North Korea, President Trump tweeted on June 30, 2017, “The era of strategic patience with the North Korea regime has failed. That patience is over.”<sup>72</sup> Negotiations and United Nations sanctions have accomplished little at a time when North Korea's aggression and military capabilities are becoming increasingly alarming. Having successfully produced a miniaturized nuclear warhead that can fit inside its missiles, and possessing an estimated 60 nuclear warheads, the North Korean military threat is advancing far more rapidly than many experts had predicted.<sup>73</sup> Most disturbingly, *The Washington Post* has reported, “U.S. officials concluded last month that Pyongyang is also outpacing expectations in its effort to build an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of striking the American mainland.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> News Today, “Trump in 1999: We Can't Rule Out Striking North Korea.”

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> “WATCH: Donald Trump Foretold the Entire North Korea Nuclear Threat in 1999 (VIDEO).”

<sup>72</sup> “Trump on North Korea: ‘Era of Strategic Patience ... Has Failed’.”

<sup>73</sup> Warrick, “North Korea Now Making Missile-Ready Nuclear Weapons, U.S. Analysts Say.”

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

It appears that President Trump may be considering whether to continue on the path of applying diplomatic and economic pressure, or whether it is time to shift to a preventative approach to dealing with North Korea. Senator Lindsey Graham told *The Hill*, “I think he’s made a decision long ago, quite frankly, to try to negotiate the threat with North Korea. ... But if negotiations fail, he is willing to abandon strategic patience and use pre-emption. ... I think he’s there mentally. ... He has told me this.”<sup>75</sup>

Presently, two strong and unpredictable leaders are escalating their rhetoric. President Trump has threatened “fire and fury like the world has never seen.”<sup>76</sup> In response, North Korea has promised to have a plan for attacking the U.S. territory of Guam by mid-August and has threatened a pre-emptive strike against the U.S. mainland.<sup>77</sup> Only time will tell what may be the result of these tactics.

## How concerned should we be?

Despite the media hype, the United States is not likely on the brink of war. In response to a question about how concerned we should be about a military conflict with North Korea, CIA director Mike Pompeo said, “There’s nothing imminent today.”<sup>78</sup> Likewise, National Security Advisor Herbert McMaster has said, “We’re not closer to war than a week ago, but we are closer to war than we were a decade ago.”<sup>79</sup>

Instead, President Trump appears to have legitimately placed the option of war on the negotiating table. However, this is most likely intended, not as a deterrent to North Korea, but as a motivator for China. As North Korea’s largest trade partner, it is widely believed that China is best positioned to stop North Korea. Gordon Chang, author of *The Coming Collapse of China*, has argued that China has “a stranglehold over the North Korean economy,” writing, “China accounts for more than 90 percent of the North’s external trade. It provides more than 90 percent of North Korea’s oil, much of it on concessionary terms. Some years, China is the source of 100 percent of the North’s aviation fuel.”<sup>80</sup> China also supplies one third of North Korea’s food and at least half of all foreign investment in North Korea.<sup>81</sup> This is why Senator John McCain told MSNBC’s Greta Van Sustran, “China is the one, the only one, that can control Kim Jong-un ... They could stop North Korea’s economy in a week.”<sup>82</sup> Likewise, Gordon Chang wrote, “When China really wants something, it lowers the boom. Beijing, anxious to start nuclear negotiations after a North Korean missile launch, cut off oil for three days in February 2003 as a warning. Pyongyang agreed to sit down for multilateral

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<sup>75</sup> Carney, “Graham: Trump Doesn’t Need Congress’ Approval for North Korea Strike.”

<sup>76</sup> Baker, “Trump Threatens ‘Fire and Fury’ Against North Korea if It Endangers U.S.”

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Hymes Jeff, “Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace 8/13/17 | Fox News Sunday August 13, 2017.”

<sup>79</sup> Lardner, “Senior U.S. Officials Say Confrontation with North Korea Is Not Imminent.”

<sup>80</sup> Chang, “China Can Disarm North Korea in the Blink of an Eye.”

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Shelbourne, “McCain Calls North Korean Leader a ‘Crazy, Fat Kid’.”

talks shortly thereafter. When China pulls the string, the Kims show their respect by acceding to Chinese demands.”<sup>83</sup>

Until now, China has had no reason to seriously interfere with North Korea’s weapons programs. China has a military alliance with North Korea, and they have almost certainly known that former presidents were not willing to engage in a war with North Korea. President Trump appears to be endeavoring to persuade China that there is now a legitimate threat of war if China does not engage in meaningful negotiations with North Korea to halt their rhetoric, aggression, and missile tests.

Knowing that China stands to lose the most in any military conflict with North Korea, and knowing that they are also the best positioned to negotiate with North Korea, President Trump appears to be focusing his efforts on convincing China of the gravity of the situation. And there are positive indicators that this strategy is succeeding. For the first time, China has unofficially spoken of remaining neutral if the U.S. retaliates to an attack by North Korea, and China has indicated that it too is getting frustrated by North Korea through its vote with the United Nations Security Council to impose greater sanctions.

President Donald Trump appears to be engaging in a high-stakes gamble to convince China to intervene. Either China will engage in meaningful negotiations, or the U.S. may be compelled to enact military options. Senator Lindsey Graham told Chris Wallace, “I’m a hundred percent certain that Donald Trump would use military force as a last resort to stop North Korea from developing a missile to hit the American homeland. I know he will do that. I hope North Korea understands it. I hope China understands it. And quite frankly, he has no other choice in my view.”<sup>84</sup>

With every gamble comes risk. War should never be taken lightly. By its very nature, it poses an existential threat to both our person and our country. It is a grave prospect which should concern us. We should not flippantly speak of war, nor should we glibly assume that God is on our side.

America does not have special nation status with God. We are not protected by virtue of having been founded as a Christian country, by the good we have done, or by the ways in which America has been used to spread the gospel throughout the world. Instead, God always reserves the right to both bless and curse any nation according to its obedience to Him ([Deut. 11:26-28](#)). After blessing a nation, God may choose to curse that same nation if it becomes disobedient. Israel, who was God’s covenant people, experienced both blessings and curses from God according to its obedience ([Lev. 26:1-46](#); [Deut. 28:1-68](#)).

If God became Israel’s enemy, willing to fight against His own people due to their rebellion, then He can become the enemy of any nation—including our own ([Isa. 63:7-10](#)). No nation can assume that God is on its side. Rather, we must be on God’s side. Nowhere is this more evident than in the book of Joshua. When approaching Jericho, Joshua saw what most scholars believe to be the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ. In this passage, He is described as a man holding a sword. Given the fact that the Israelites were actively invading the land of Canaan, Joshua reasonably asked, “Are you for us,

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<sup>83</sup> Chang, “China Can Disarm North Korea in the Blink of an Eye.”

<sup>84</sup> Hymes Jeff, “Fox News Sunday with Chris Wallace 8/13/17 | Fox News Sunday August 13, 2017.”

or for our adversaries?” The answer he received was, “No; but I am the commander of the army of the Lord” (Josh. 5:13-14). God wasn’t choosing sides between two armies. Instead, there was God’s side and everyone else’s side.

If ever there was a time for God to be on Israel’s side, this was it. God had personally led the Israelites to the land which He had promised to their forefathers. He had supernaturally dried up the Jordan River so that they could cross into the land, and He was about to miraculously collapse the walls of Jericho. Nevertheless, Jesus told Joshua that He was not on Israel’s side; neither was He on the side of their enemies. Instead, he commanded the armies of heaven, so Joshua had best be sure to be on His side.

God expects us to join His side, not to invoke Him to join our side. We can choose to join God in faithful obedience to Him, or we can choose to stand in opposition to Him. When asked whether God was on his side, Abraham Lincoln said, “Sir, my concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God’s side, for God is always right.”<sup>85</sup> Our question then, should be, “Are we as a nation faithfully seeking after God as we seek a resolution to the question of North Korea?” Or are we making the same mistake that Israel made in assuming that because they were the covenant people of God, and because they were far less wicked than their neighboring nations, God would support and protect Israel in any military conflict?

It is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that because North Korea is among the most oppressive regimes in the world, God would never allow them to succeed in their endeavors. In contrast to North Korea, America stands as a beacon of light to the world. Surely God would protect America in any conflict with North Korea!?

Although this may sound reasonable, the Bible teaches otherwise. In the first two chapters of Habakkuk, we read of a conversation between the prophet and God as Habakkuk struggled to understand how God could use the Babylonians to judge His own people. How could a holy and just God watch His people fall to the most wicked, depraved, and ruthless nation on Earth? What we discover is that God has a plan. He chose to use the Babylonians to judge His own people so that they would repent and once again be a nation that could be used by God. As for the Babylonians, the day was coming when they too would be judged. God was merely moving the nations like pawns to accomplish His greater purposes.

The fact that North Korea is a wicked and ruthless nation will not prevent God from using it to accomplish His greater purposes. As Americans, we should not be asking which nation is more wicked. Instead, we should be asking which nation is obedient to God. The fact that we are both nations in disobedience should give us great concern. Perhaps God may choose to signal to the entire world the consequences of disobedience by using one of the most incapable nations to bring one of the most capable nations to its knees.

Being a nation in rebellion to God, we as Americans have no assurances if we engage in a war with North Korea. Neither do we have any assurances that North Korea will not successfully use nuclear

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<sup>85</sup> “Abraham Lincoln Quotes.”

weapons against the United States if we choose to ignore them. Certainly, we have cause to be concerned!

## How should we respond as Christians?

When a nation is in rebellion to God, God is that nation's worst enemy. History is replete with mighty nations who have experienced the judgment of God because of their rebellion. According to Leviticus chapter 18, God judged mighty nations in the land of Canaan because of their adultery, homosexuality, and the practice of infanticide. For these sins, they were cast out of their land by the invading forces of the Israelites. This should be deeply troubling given that our nation practices these same sins. In fact, not only do we as a nation condone these practices, we celebrate and flaunt them.

Fortunately, we have a patient God who seeks to turn people's hearts before exacting judgment. Sometimes this is accomplished by lifting His hand of protection and blessing to alert a nation of its need to repent ([Amos 4:6-10](#)). In allowing trouble to come upon a nation, God endeavors to draw people out of their complacency and compel them to evaluate why they are suffering. God's goal is that they repent and submit themselves to His ways and commandments.

Those nations who ignore this corrective judgment and persist in their rebellion risk experiencing a severe form of judgment intended to shake a nation at its core ([Amos 4:2-3](#)). This shaking is designed to compel the people to let go of the idols to which they cling. Those nations who repent experience healing, while those nations who do not are often destroyed by their rebellion.

It could be argued that America has long been experiencing a corrective form of judgment from God. Events such as the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center, the economic crisis of 2008, mass shootings, and escalating racial conflicts are likely a result of God having lifted His hand of blessing and protection. However, we as a nation have not been alerted to our need for God and the extent of our rebellion. Instead, we appear to have doubled-down in our rebellion with Supreme Court decisions such as *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which legalized same-sex marriages, and *Whole Woman's Health v. Hellerstedt*, which struck down parts of a Texas law that could have drastically reduced the number of abortion clinics in the state.<sup>86, 87</sup>

All indications point to America as a nation that is ripe for judgment. As such, crises such as this escalating conflict with North Korea could be blessings in disguise as they interrupt our ordinary lifestyle and compel us as a nation to ask bigger questions. While songs such as "God Bless America" may be popular at times like this, we as a nation ought to ask, "Why should God want to protect and bless America? How would God's greater purposes be furthered by blessing America in this conflict?"

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<sup>86</sup> Liptak, "Supreme Court Ruling Makes Same-Sex Marriage a Right Nationwide."

<sup>87</sup> Liptak, "Supreme Court Strikes Down Texas Abortion Restrictions."

Likely, most Americans are less interested in how this crisis is resolved as they are in how quickly they will be able to resume their ordinary lifestyles. As Christians, we should protect ourselves from such thinking. Often our national lifestyle is one of rebellion to God. Should we as Christians truly desire to return to a sense of normalcy? Difficult as it may be, we should honestly ask ourselves, “Do we really want things to go back to normal?”

In [2 Chronicles 15:1-7](#), we read that God troubled Israel with every kind of distress, even allowing other nations to crush them so that they would repent and call upon the Lord. Perhaps we as Christians ought to pray that God would continue to disrupt our ordinary way of life so as to compel us as a nation to face the reality of our relationship with God. Perhaps we should thank God for providing us with a fantastic opportunity to challenge the thinking of our family, friends, co-workers, and neighbors. Perhaps we should be less focused on the efforts of our national leaders to resolve this issue and be more focused on our own efforts to use this issue to initiate difficult conversations with our loved ones.

Introspective conversations are best had at times of crisis. As Christians, we should view this conflict with North Korea as a prime opportunity to have these difficult discussions. However, this must begin with our determining that what we most desire for our country is that God’s purposes be accomplished ... even if it means major disruptions to our current way of life. Normalcy is a path which is leading our nation toward destruction. Where do our hearts rest? Are we as Christians willing to sacrifice our normal and comfortable lifestyles in pursuit of seeing our nation reach a point of repentance?

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