

North Korea has taken provocative actions for decades, but this time could trigger war

The April 15, 1969, incident is drawing renewed scrutiny amid threats from North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho that the North has the right to shoot down American warplanes even if they didn't enter the nation's airspace.

The Pentagon said it would not alter any operations in response to the threats, and it is unclear if North Korea is capable of downing a stealth American jet, which is capable of evading and jamming enemy radar.

But the earlier incident does highlight the challenges the United States faces in responding to North Korea's provocations and why the isolated nation feels confident in repeatedly antagonizing Washington.

As bad as the rhetoric may seem, some of North Korea's brazen attacks in the past have brought the United States even closer to war than the current heated climate, said Sheila Miyoshi Jager, a professor at Oberlin College and author of *Brothers at War: The Unending Conflict in Korea*.

For decades North Korea has felt free to challenge the U.S., betting that Washington will not react militarily.

In 1994 North Korea shot down an American helicopter when it mistakenly crossed the DMZ during a training mission. One of the two pilots was killed in the attack.

In 1968, North Korea captured the USS Pueblo, a Navy spy ship. One crew member was killed and 82 others were held as prisoners for nearly a year.

In 1976, North Korean guards attacked a group of South Koreans and U.S. soldiers preparing to prune a tree in the DMZ in order to improve visibility from a watch tower. Two U.S. officers were killed.

The United States returned with a 60-man security platoon and a 16-man tree-cutting detail to remove the tree. B-52s and a South Korean reconnaissance company was positioned to react if North Koreans tried to interfere.

The Americans cut down the tree without incident, but it was tense. The U.S. was prepared to go to war if North Koreans attempted to resist, Jager said.

Today, the stakes are even higher since North Korea has stockpiled nuclear weapons and will soon have the capability to place warheads on missiles that can reach the U.S. mainland, the Pentagon said.

"Whether it's three months or six months or 18 months, it is soon, and we ought to conduct ourselves as though it is just a matter of time, and a matter of very short time, before North Korea has that capability," Marine Gen. Joe Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said Tuesday.

The relationship between North Korean leader Kim Jong Un and President Trump is also more personal than previous leaders of both countries.

Trump said Tuesday if the U.S. takes a military option in dealing with the threat from North Korea, "it will be devastating."

"We are totally prepared" for a military option, but it's not the preferred one, Trump said. "If we have to take it, we will."

Trump also went on to blame previous U.S. presidents for not dealing with the North Korean threat. "I will fix this mess," he said.

Trump previously dismissed Kim as "rocket man" and said the North will be met with "fire and fury" if it continues to threaten America. Kim has called Trump a "dotard" and likened him to a scared dog.

Trump's national security adviser, Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, said the president's comments about Kim have been similar in substance to other American presidents, though he acknowledged the earlier statements "probably don't include the word, 'rocket man.'"

McMaster said Trump's remarks are to make clear how the U.S. would respond to a threat from the North. "I don't think there is any lack of clarity now," McMaster said during a conference sponsored by the Institute for the Study of War.

Dunford told Congress Tuesday that North Korea has not altered its military posture despite the heightened rhetoric between Pyongyang and Washington.

“While the political space is clearly very charged right now, we haven’t seen a change in the posture of North Korean forces,” he told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

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