

ISLAND VOICES

# Miscalculations could lead to disastrous war with North Korea

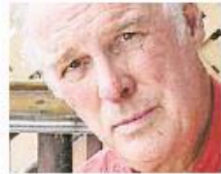
By Peter C. Oleson

Is war with North Korea inevitable? Probably, yes. This is not about Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un calling each other names. But their rhetorical barbs are not conducive to peace. Miscalculation is the likely spark that will ignite a conflagration.

Kim is convinced that having a potent nuclear force is essential to his regime survival. He is also intent on reunifying the two Koreas, a dream of both his grandfather and father. This would not be possible without overwhelming force that could deter his main opponent, the U.S.

This week the U.S. flew B-1 bombers, escorted by fighter aircraft, up the east coast of North Korea, stay-

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ing a safe 200 miles off the coast. I remember well the night of April 15, 1969, when the North Koreans shot down a Navy EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft 90 miles off the coast. I was the Air Force intelligence watch officer in the Alert Center of the Defense Intelligence Agency in the Pentagon that night. One can feel absolutely helpless reading about an attack

immediately after the fact.

This occurred a little more than a year after the capture of the USS Pueblo off the North Korean coast. The crew was released in December 1968 after the North Koreans had achieved a great

propaganda victory. North Korean provocations extend back to 1958 with the hijacking of a South Korean airliner. The list is long. In 1968 a North Korean commando squad infiltrated Seoul in an attempt to assassinate President Park Chung-hee. In the 1970s North Korean infiltration tunnels under the DMZ were first discovered. In recent years,

North Korea torpedoed a South Korean Navy corvette, killing 46. Incidents along the DMZ and the western islands are commonplace, including artillery fire.

Retaliation for North Korean provocations has always been restrained. Economic sanctions have been the favorite tool of the U.S. and its allies. These, however, have been largely undermined by China, Russia and North Korea's proficient use of black markets and trade with sympathetic regimes, such as Iran and Malaysia.

Analyses by various groups conclude that Kim and his close supporters are largely unaffected by economic sanctions to date. But as the Chinese increase pressure, which it appears Beijing is doing at a measured pace, Kim may react in unpredictable ways. An

attack on U.S. aircraft flying off North Korea's coasts is likely. The U.S. would be faced with a difficult decision about whether and how to retaliate. Past experience indicates that retaliation for such an attack would be modest. North Korean propaganda would spin the attack to declare a great victory.

Past attempts to negotiate with North Korea have met with failure. The Clinton, Bush and Obama administrations were all unsuccessful in negotiating with Pyongyang. The lesson is not to believe that North Korea will abide by any agreement it signs.

A renewed Korean War is a terrible thought. (A state of war still exists as the 1953 armistice was not a peace treaty.) South Koreans and probably the Japanese

would suffer greatly, especially if Kim in desperation resorts to using nuclear weapons. The conundrum is that as time goes on, Kim's nuclear arsenal grows, as does his ability to hold South Korea, Japan, the U.S., and possibly China, hostage to his demands.

Is it better to confront Kim now, or wait and hope that he will agree to some deal? I am not hopeful that time is on the side of the U.S. and its allies. I am not hopeful given the demonstrated personalities of Kim and Trump that rational thought will inevitably prevail. Miscalculation is an ever-present danger. Remember the Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964. Remember the aftermath of Sarajevo in 1914. Once the first shot is fired, where will it stop?