

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

COMMITTEES:
ARMED SERVICES
ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES
INTELLIGENCE
JOINT ECONOMIC

January 11, 2018

The Honorable James N. Mattis
Secretary of Defense
1100 Defense Pentagon
Washington, D.C. 20301

Dear Secretary Mattis:

I write to express my deep concerns regarding reports that the administration is considering a “bloody nose” strategy against North Korea in which the United States would conduct a preemptive, targeted military strike.

As a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, I understand the importance of keeping all options on the table, including military options, in terms of negotiations and strategy. However, in the context of military action and North Korea, I have read and seen various war gaming scenarios for the Korean Peninsula, and I am deeply concerned about the potential consequences of a preemptive military strike on North Korea and the risks of miscalculation and retaliation. Moreover, without congressional authorization, it is unclear what the legal or constitutional basis would be for the administration to take such action.

When considering a limited strike, the critical question inevitably turns to what actually constitutes a limited strike. In our eyes, a limited strike against even a single, military site could easily be perceived by North Korea as the opening salvo and a declaration of war. Even putting aside the myriad targeting challenges presented by North Korea’s missile and nuclear programs, we have no way of predicting the exact form of North Korean retaliation. Depending on the extent of damage or loss of life, that retaliation could easily prompt a heavy U.S., Korean, or Japanese counter-response and result in a full-scale conventional or nuclear war on the Korean peninsula. Ultimately, it is a massive gamble to believe and recommend that a particular type of limited, preemptive strike will not be met with an escalatory response from Kim Jong Un, and neither the United States nor our allies should take that determination lightly.

As you know, in virtually every scenario, North Korean retaliation to a preemptive military strike would result in mass casualties and utter devastation. The Congressional Research Service estimates that upwards of 25 million people would be impacted on either side of the border, including at least 100,000 U.S. citizens. Even more disturbing, as many as 300,000 could die in the first few hours of combat from artillery, rockets, and short range missiles. If nuclear weapons were used, tens of millions of casualties could be expected. While we must always be ready to respond with decisive military action to an attack, it would be extremely irresponsible to instigate military conflict prior to exhausting every diplomatic option.

That is why I appreciated your comments at the Demilitarized Zone on October 27, 2017. North Korea's nuclear program is perhaps the most complex foreign policy challenge our nation has faced in decades, and I agree with you that diplomacy is the answer to ending the nuclear crisis with North Korea, not war.

I respectfully urge you and other senior decision makers to approach today's conflict with North Korea with the necessary deliberation, restraint, calm, and desire for a diplomatic solution that our leaders demonstrated during the Cuban Missile Crisis. I urge you to explore every possible diplomatic solution to this conflict.

Thank you for your leadership and service to our country.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Martin Heinrich", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Martin Heinrich
United States Senator