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## **The Right Way to Coerce North Korea**

**Ending the Threat  
Without Going to War**

*Victor Cha and Katrin Fraser Katz*

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# The Right Way to Coerce North Korea

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## Ending the Threat Without Going to War

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*Victor Cha and Katrin Fraser Katz*

**W**hen it comes to North Korea, U.S. President Donald Trump's policies have been whiplash inducing. On February 23, he appeared to be gearing up for a conflict when he said that if sanctions against Pyongyang didn't work, Washington would have to move to "phase two," which could be "very, very unfortunate for the world." But just two weeks later, Trump abruptly changed course and accepted an invitation to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un—a decision that caught even his own White House and State Department by surprise.

Trump's newfound enthusiasm for diplomacy has temporarily lowered the temperature on the Korean Peninsula, but it also underlines a bigger question: Does the United States have a strategy for North Korea, or are these twists and turns merely the whims of a temperamental president? In the past, rash and uninformed decisions by U.S. officials on the peninsula—such as acquiescing to Japan's occupation of Korea in 1905 and excluding Korea from the U.S. Cold War defense perimeter in 1950—have had grave consequences. The United States cannot afford a similar outcome today.

Trump's unpredictability has had some upsides. His self-proclaimed "madman" behavior may have played a role in bringing the North Koreans to the table, and the Trump administration's policy of applying, in the White House's words, "maximum pressure" has yielded some impressive results. An unprecedented summit between the U.S. and North Korean leaders could indeed bring lasting peace to Asia. But it could also go wrong: if negotiations fail, the administration might

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**VICTOR CHA** is Professor of Government in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University and a Senior Adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

**KATRIN FRASER KATZ** is a Fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. She served on the staff of the U.S. National Security Council from 2007 to 2008.

conclude that a military strike is the only way forward, greatly increasing the chance of war.

The Trump administration must ground its summit diplomacy and overall approach to North Korea in a strategy of comprehensive coercion that clearly defines U.S. objectives, leverages Washington's most effective diplomatic and military tools, and aligns its Korea policy with the broader U.S. strategy in Asia. Failure to do this would only benefit Kim and increase the likelihood that the United States will get "played," as Trump has characterized past negotiations. After a year of saber rattling, and with North Korea likely to be just months away from possessing the capability to launch a nuclear attack on the continental United States, the stakes could hardly be higher. In the not unlikely event that talks break down, the United States will need a strategy that prevents the parties from sliding into a disastrous war.

## **WHIPLASH**

During Trump's first year in office, North Korea conducted more than twice as many ballistic missile tests (20) as it did during the first year of Barack Obama's presidency (8). The result was a constant exchange of recriminations between the United States and North Korea. After North Korea tested its first intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), in July, Trump promised to rain "fire and fury" on Pyongyang. After North Korea threatened a nuclear attack on "the heart of the U.S.," Trump's national security adviser hinted that a preventive attack was becoming increasingly likely. Meanwhile, rumors swirled that the Joint Chiefs of Staff and U.S. Pacific Command were drawing up plans for a limited military strike to give Kim a "bloody nose." Combined, we have decades of experience working on this problem, and one of us, Victor Cha, was once under consideration for U.S. ambassador to South Korea, before the Trump administration withdrew his candidacy. Never before have we witnessed more discussion about possible military escalation than in the past year.

But 2018 has brought a dramatic shift. The government of South Korean President Moon Jae-in, who is much more open to engagement with North Korea than his predecessor, decided to capitalize on what it perceived as toned-down language in Kim's New Year's address. In January, it achieved a reopening of the long-suspended inter-Korean dialogue channels and facilitated an all-expenses-paid invitation for the North Korean team to attend the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang. While briefing Trump on the phone about these developments, Moon recalled



*From Pyongyang with love: a North Korean ICBM test, July 2017*

Trump's campaign pledge to have a hamburger with Kim. Ultimately, Moon managed to elicit a promise from Trump to consider meeting the North Korean leader—a message that Seoul dutifully conveyed to Pyongyang. At the Olympics, despite exchanging little more than icy stares with U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, Kim's younger sister presented a letter to Moon that suggested her brother's interest in improving relations with the United States.

In early March, shortly after the Olympics concluded, Kim warmly welcomed a group of South Korean envoys to Pyongyang, led by the South Korean national security adviser, Chung Eui-yong. After two days of meetings, Kim agreed to cross into the South for an inter-Korean summit by the end of April. He also promised a moratorium on missile and nuclear testing contingent on dialogue with the United States. According to the South Koreans, Kim said that the “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” was possible if the U.S. threat to his country were removed.

Not to be outdone, on March 8, Trump scrapped his daily White House schedule to host the South Korean national security adviser in the Oval Office soon after his delegation landed at Dulles Airport (Chung was supposed to brief the president on his recent North Korean trip the next day). Trump called for an immediate summit with Kim (which he was eventually persuaded to push to May) and, in a dramatic moment

recalling his television show *The Apprentice*, made an impromptu visit to the White House briefing room to tease an imminent “major announcement” on North Korea, which he later let the South Koreans deliver in front of the West Wing. Shortly afterward, he conveyed his enthusiasm for diplomacy in a flurry of optimistic tweets.

### **WINGING IT?**

The South Korean government deserves credit for turning an impending crisis into an opportunity. It is possible that a face-to-face meeting between Kim and Trump, who are both fond of making surprise decisions, could bring progress on one of the world’s most dangerous problems. But it is easier to understand Seoul’s and Pyongyang’s motives for engaging in diplomacy than Washington’s.

For South Korea, the imminent threat of North Korean aggression during the Winter Olympics, as well as long-term concerns about a renewed campaign of North Korean missile and nuclear tests after the conclusion of the Paralympics in late March, made engineering some form of détente a strategic imperative. Meanwhile, North Korea’s apparent change of heart likely stems from the economic bite of Trump’s maximum-pressure campaign, which has cut oil imports and coal exports, dried up hard-currency inflows, and made commodity prices spike in the country. According to Trump administration officials, the sanctions have caused North Korean gas prices to triple and have reduced the country’s exports by more than \$2.7 billion. Today, paper is so scarce in the North that the state-run newspaper has been forced to cut its circulation. There have even been reports in South Korean media that North Korea used telephones, rather than global VSAT communications, to speak with South Korean air traffic controllers when coordinating the arrival of high-level North Korean delegations for the Olympics, since the state had lost access to satellite networks after defaulting on payments. The news that the Trump administration was seriously considering a military strike may also have contributed to this turnaround.

But Kim also has other motivations for reengaging. A pause in weapons testing at this point would do little to set back Pyongyang’s nuclear program. Moreover, a meeting with Trump would give the rogue leader the all-important recognition that he craves and, depending on what Trump relinquished in exchange for a freeze in North Korea’s weapons testing and development, could advance the North’s long-standing goal of getting the United States to accept the country as a nuclear power.

What about the United States? Although there is an internal logic to North and South Korean actions, inconsistencies abound in the U.S. approach. After spending most of 2017 discussing military options, the administration backpedaled in January and denied that such plans even existed. Officials have said that the sanctions campaign is designed to compel the North Korean regime to return to the negotiating table, but the amount of attention Trump's National Security Council and State Department have paid to preparing for negotiations pales in comparison to the considerable effort devoted to developing sanctions and military strike options. The administration's diplomatic strategy to date has amounted to little more than a list of don'ts: don't reward talks, don't let up on sanctions, don't make the mistakes of past administrations.

Furthermore, because Trump has jettisoned the interagency process, which brings in experts and policymakers from across the U.S. government to advise the president, negotiations will occur amid ominous conditions. Trump will be flying blind into meetings with Kim, acting on little more than his gut instincts, without the advice of experienced foreign policy and Asian affairs experts, who would undoubtedly counsel him to avoid verbose but meaningless summit statements and to press Kim on making tangible steps toward denuclearization. Meanwhile, the North Koreans are probably only a few tests away from gaining the capacity to reach the continental United States with nuclear-tipped ICBMs. The moratorium on testing that Pyongyang offered the South Korean envoys will merely maintain the status quo. Since the pause is contingent on talks, Pyongyang will be able to resume testing the day the talks end, and it will likely continue covertly working on its programs all the while. Finally, there is no reason to believe that North Korea has changed its long-standing aims of achieving recognition as a nuclear power, ejecting U.S. forces from South Korea, and undermining the U.S. defense commitment to South Korea.

To counter these negotiating traps, Trump might offer incremental energy and economic assistance and sanctions alleviation in exchange for a freeze in and the eventual dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear weapons and long-range ICBM programs. North Korea's missile program, in particular, has not been the topic of negotiations in almost two decades, and Trump could score a victory on this count. Or he might choose a bolder path that would put much bigger carrots on the table, including the normalization of relations or even a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War. It would be ironic if Trump, an avowed hawk on North

Korea, adopted an approach to diplomacy that doves have advocated for years, but it is not out of the question.

### **WHAT TRUMP SHOULD DO**

Regardless of how talks do or do not play out, the United States must base its policy going forward on a set of sound principles. North Korea's effort to develop nuclear missiles capable of reaching the United States demands an urgent response. Past behavior suggests that Kim will try to share these weapons with other states and nonstate actors. Down the road, he might use them in an attempt to intimidate the United States into offering concessions or even withdrawing its troops from South Korea, which would leave the country vulnerable to an invasion. More broadly, North Korea's acquisition of these weapons, if left unchecked, could undermine the global nonproliferation regime. The United States must keep North Korean denuclearization at the top of its strategic priorities. Accepting North Korea as a nuclear power and building a new relationship from that basis would legitimize its pursuit of nuclear weapons and send a dangerous signal to other countries that are considering starting their own programs.

Trump's pursuit of a diplomatic solution has the best chance of success if it is bolstered by a strategy that ramps up the regional and international pressure on North Korea. The Trump administration's approach to North Korea thus far has involved swings between confrontation and engagement without a clear link to broader U.S. strategic objectives in the region. A comprehensive coercive strategy for denuclearization diplomacy would build on the strengths of the maximum-pressure campaign while more fully leveraging the support and resources of regional allies and partners in pursuing shared long-term goals. This strategy would involve five key components.

First, Washington must continue to strengthen the global coalition that it has mustered in its highly successful sanctions program. Unlike the so-called smart sanctions campaign 13 years ago, Trump's effort has the backing of ten UN Security Council resolutions, which grant the United States virtually unlimited authority to punish violators. Moreover, compliance with the sanctions has increased because the Trump administration is more willing than past administrations to share intelligence information with third parties to help them stop sanctioned activities in their countries.

Second, the United States should buttress this sanctions campaign with a statement on nonproliferation. This message should signal unambiguously to North Korea and any recipients or facilitators of its nuclear

weapons that the United States will hold accountable any state, group, or individual found to be complicit in a transfer of nuclear material—if necessary, through the use of force.

Third, the United States must upgrade its alliances with Japan and South Korea. Militarily, that means improving capabilities regarding integrated missile defense, intelligence sharing, antisubmarine warfare, and conventional strike missiles to deter North Korean threats. The political scientists Michael Green and Matthew Kroenig have outlined a useful wish list: adding more missile defense systems in the region, deploying B-1 and B-2 bombers to new locations, undertaking cyber-operations to impede North Korea's missile program development, and encouraging South Korea

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*The United States must keep denuclearization at the top of its strategic priorities.*

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to purchase shorter-range missile defense systems (similar to Israel's Iron Dome) to defend against North Korean artillery. The United States should also remain open to additional conventional strike capabilities for Japan and South Korea, the use of which would require U.S. sign-off.

At the political level, the United States should push for a joint statement with Japan and South Korea that pledges that an attack on one will be treated as an attack on all. Affirming collective defense is important because North Korea's long-term strategy is to decouple South Korea's security from Japan's and the United States'. Indeed, one of the purposes of North Korea's long-range missile tests last year was to reduce South Korea's confidence in the U.S. commitment to deterring an attack against South Korea and raise doubts in Japan and the United States about their willingness to trade Tokyo or Los Angeles for Seoul in the event of war. In order to convey a clear deterrent message to Pyongyang, the collective-defense statement should commit all three allies to the use of force in response to a North Korean attack.

These military and political measures should be complemented by diplomatic and economic strategies that treat U.S. alliances more holistically. For example, the United States should approach updates and adjustments to the existing free-trade agreement with South Korea or U.S.–South Korean defense cost-sharing negotiations with an awareness that tension in one area of these relationships can make progress elsewhere more difficult, if not impossible, particularly if the Japanese public or the South Korean public is paying attention and anti-U.S. sentiment has been rallied.

Although the North Korea problem is immediate, the longer-term strategic competitor in Asia is China, whose challenge to U.S. preeminence has been augmented by Russia's spoiler role across the globe. Bolstering U.S. alliances would strengthen Washington's hand against these threats, as well, by significantly improving military defense capabilities, counterproliferation efforts, and diplomatic coordination among U.S. allies and partners in East Asia. Reinforcing the U.S. military posture in the region would also increase the costs to China and Russia of subsidizing the Kim regime, not complying with sanctions, or undertaking other problematic behavior.

Fourth, although Washington may seek an assurance from Pyongyang that it will not proliferate, the Trump administration must also push for the establishment of a counterproliferation coalition that shares intelligence about maritime nuclear smuggling and cooperates on law enforcement. Japan's and South Korea's port authorities, coast guards, and navies, along with the United States' considerable assets, should work together to prevent nuclear material from leaving the country. Most of this enforcement activity would likely take place in ports, but the allies should be prepared to carry out interceptions at sea as needed. The United States should also approach China and Russia about the possibility of building a five-party counterproliferation regime in Northeast Asia. Beijing and Moscow should see benefits to stopping any North Korean loose nukes, but if they are not willing to participate, then they should be prepared to face the diplomatic and economic consequences of allowing North Korean proliferation across their borders.

Finally, the United States must continue preparing both diplomatic and military plans for North Korea. This is critical to, on the one hand, upholding deterrence against Pyongyang and, on the other, creating a credible off-ramp for the regime. Washington should maintain its existing high-tempo military exercises in the region, preposition ammunition stocks for a possible conflict, and rotate strategic assets such as B-52 bombers, stealth warplanes, nuclear submarines, and aircraft carriers regularly to the peninsula. All these steps should prevent North Korea from spreading its nuclear weapons, threatening the United States, or taking offensive actions in the region.

Given the limited amount of time to prepare for a Kim-Trump summit, the meeting is unlikely to bear immediate fruit beyond some grandiose statements about a normalization of relations, a peaceful end to the Korean War armistice, and denuclearization, statements that

the leaders would then authorize their governments to begin negotiations over. This outcome would itself be significant, but it should not lead to a lifting of sanctions unless North Korea backs up its promises with actions.

Whether the summit succeeds or not, the United States must move beyond broad statements and invite Pyongyang to reiterate the denuclearization pledges it made during the six-party talks in 2005 and 2007. The documents outlining these pledges are the only place where North Korea has ever been forced to dump its noncommittal and vague formulations about a “nuclear-free peninsula” in favor of specific and written commitments to “abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs.” These agreements are also of value to North Korea (and China) because they state that the United States will not attack North Korea with conventional or nuclear weapons, the only written security assurance that addresses North Korean concerns about “hostile” U.S. policy. Washington should also compel the regime to improve its human rights record as a good-faith demonstration of the authenticity of its diplomatic intentions. North Korea will undoubtedly have its own long list of wants, but for the United States, the summit must establish zero tolerance for any plutonium- or uranium-based nuclear weapons stockpiles or the deployment of long- or intermediate-range ballistic missiles and call for substantial reductions in the stocks of short-range ones. Absent the preservation of these core security interests, neither summit diplomacy nor working-level agreements will be worth much.

Following this overall strategy would enhance the credibility of Washington’s negotiating position, while also securing U.S. interests in the event of failure. Broadly speaking, comprehensive coercion would get the United States out of crisis management mode and demonstrate U.S. resolve without unnecessarily risking war. It would also strengthen U.S. alliances in Asia for the long term, directly address the proliferation threat, increase the costs to those who subsidize Pyongyang, and complement the United States’ regional commitments.

### **WHAT NOT TO DO**

When it comes to North Korea, the only American voice that really matters is Trump’s. By agreeing to meet with Kim, Trump has improved his media ratings, but he has also inadvertently increased the chances of war. If his latest diplomatic gamble doesn’t pay off, the administration may come away from negotiations more determined to use the military option.

Indeed, even amid talk of negotiations, some senior officials in the Trump administration have continued to contemplate using a limited military strike to prevent North Korea's development of a long-range nuclear missile. The rationale is that a strike on North Korea's nuclear and missile facilities, perhaps after its next test, would give Kim a "bloody nose" painful enough to compel him to begin the process of denuclearization, but not so damaging as to start a wider war on the peninsula.

The logic behind a limited military strike is that North Korea will be undeterrable once it acquires the ability to hit the continental United States with a nuclear weapon—because the regime is unpredictable, economically desperate, and has used chemical weapons against a civilian target as recently as last year. If Kim can strike the continental United States, the argument goes, then Washington will not be able to prevent nuclear proliferation or nuclear black-

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*Trump cannot solve the problem of a nuclear North Korea with a preventive military strike.*

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mail. A strike would constitute an immediate, decisive action to prevent that outcome. It would also demonstrate the capability and willingness of the United States to employ all options to stop North Korea's nuclear program, a message that would no doubt resonate beyond the region.

Yet this logic is flawed. If Kim would be undeterrable if he had nuclear weapons able to reach the continental United States, then why would a limited military strike deter him from responding in kind? And if Kim did respond militarily, then how could the United States prevent the crisis from escalating given that Kim would have just proved himself not to have a clear and rational understanding of signals and deterrence?

Some Americans argue that the risks are worth taking because it's better that people die "over there" than at home. That, too, is a misguided sentiment. On any given day, there are 230,000 Americans living in South Korea and another 90,000 or so in Japan. Evacuating them would be almost impossible. The largest American evacuation in history was about 60,000 from Saigon in 1975. An evacuation from South Korea would be infinitely more difficult. Even if the State Department tripled the number of consular officers in South Korea, the process would likely take months. Moreover, the normal evacuation points south and east of the peninsula would not be feasible to use in a war scenario because of the North Korean missile threat, which would mean that the only way out would be through China.

But in a crisis, the waterways around the peninsula would be clogged with a million Chinese seeking to leave, as well.

Under a rain of North Korean artillery, American citizens in the region would most likely have to hunker down until the war ended. Although those in Japan might be protected by U.S. missile defense systems, the U.S. population in South Korea would not be as lucky. To be clear: by launching a preventive strike, the president would be putting at risk an American population the size of that of Cincinnati or Pittsburgh, not to mention millions of South Koreans and Japanese, all based on the unproven assumption that an undeterrable and unpredictable dictator would be cowed into submission by a demonstration of U.S. power.

Some may argue that U.S. casualties and even a wider war on the peninsula are worth risking if a preventive strike would preserve the post-World War II regional and international order in the long term. But this proposition is highly problematic. A military strike would only delay, not stop, Kim's missile and nuclear programs. Washington does not know where all of North Korea's nuclear installations are, and even if it did, many are hidden deep underground and in the side of mountains, beyond the reach of even large "bunker buster" weapons. Furthermore, a limited strike would not stem the threat of proliferation. In fact, it would only exacerbate it, turning what might be a moneymaking endeavor for the Kim regime into a vengeful effort to equip actors arrayed against the United States.

This strategy also risks fracturing the impressive coalition that the Trump administration has brought together for its maximum-pressure campaign. A unilateral military attack would undercut what has so far been a successful bid to deplete the currency reserves North Korea has been using to build its programs. Finally, a strike could harm key U.S. alliances. Japan and South Korea insist that they must be consulted before the United States considers a strike. Going it alone is always an option, but doing so could fracture, if not end, the very alliances that the Trump administration has declared it seeks to strengthen in the face of a rising China.

Ultimately, Trump cannot solve the problem of a nuclear North Korea with a preventive military strike. This assessment is widely shared by former members of the intelligence community, the National Security Council, the State Department, and the Defense Department who served in both Democratic and Republican administrations. As Steve

Bannon, Trump's former chief strategist, put it in an interview: "Until somebody solves the part of the equation that shows me that ten million people in Seoul don't die in the first 30 minutes . . . there's no military solution here, they got us."

### **THE BEST OF LOUSY CHOICES**

Going forward, Washington should build on the maximum-pressure campaign, embed negotiations in a broader regional strategy, and forgo a military strike in favor of new efforts to strengthen regional deterrence and counterproliferation through close cooperation with U.S. allies. Such a strategy could deliver the same potential benefits as a limited strike without the costs. And if the Kim-Trump summit fails, it could also keep the two countries from immediately going to war.

China and Russia would not like this approach, but from their perspective, it is preferable to a military strike, which could lead to a U.S.–North Korean nuclear exchange in their neighborhood. Moreover, few states, including China, are comfortable with the proliferation risk posed by a nuclear North Korea. In fact, under this strategy, China and Russia may decide to participate in counterproliferation efforts or even in an enduring multilateral security institution.

Some in the global community fear that China and North Korea could frame certain actions, such as an embargo to prevent proliferation, as an act of war. To counter this, the United States and its allies should, to the extent possible, seek legal authorization for their actions through UN Security Council resolutions keyed to the next set of North Korean provocations or to proliferation.

Doves may argue that this strategy would generate insecurity in Pyongyang that would further justify the regime's pursuit of weapons. They may think that a better alternative would be to throw a diplomatic Hail Mary—as Trump may well do—such as declaring peace on the peninsula and pulling U.S. troops out of South Korea. Over the long term, a peace treaty might be possible, but first, the facts on the ground must change. The regime's intention to pursue nuclear-tipped ICBMs presents grave new threats to the U.S. homeland and allies in the region that must be addressed. The pressure of sanctions must be maintained, but that doesn't mean there is no room for subtlety in efforts to shape North Korean behavior. The sanctions campaign, if handled carefully, might be designed to target the regime while leaving space for market development, information dissemination, and humanitarian assistance

among ordinary people. Still, a Hail Mary without tangible North Korean actions toward denuclearization might be great for TV ratings, but it would also give Kim what he wants (nuclear recognition) while offering the United States nothing but empty promises.

Finally, critics might argue that a strategy of comprehensive coercion would simply take too much time, and time only plays into North Korea's hands as the country continues its nuclear sprint. This critique is not unwarranted; in recent decades, sensitive historical and domestic issues have hampered Japanese–South Korean military cooperation, which could impede defense planning among U.S. allies. In the past, however, crises involving North Korea have led to security cooperation between Japan and South Korea in a timely and prompt fashion. In addition, although the push for a Kim-Trump summit is dramatic, it may have shifted the play to a longer game, as bold statements by leaders who love flair and drama will have to be translated into action by policy minions in painstaking detail over weeks and months, if not years. The United States should use this time to invest in its alliances and strengthen its position in the region.

Coordinating and developing the capabilities needed for security cooperation with Japan and South Korea will take time, but it will put the United States in a better position in the long run. It's important to distinguish between strategy and tactics. Tactical responses are always possible in the near term, but tactics without a strategy can lead one down undesirable paths. As former U.S. Deputy Secretary of Defense John Hamre has argued, recent U.S. claims that “time has run out,” which were designed to pressure the North Koreans, have only pushed Washington further into a corner, under pressure to carry out a threatened military attack, and they have done nothing to advance a strategy outlining what the United States should be doing before, during, and after any negotiations.

In the land of lousy options, no plan is perfect. But some are demonstrably better than others. A comprehensive coercion strategy for denuclearization diplomacy would significantly increase the pressure on North Korea. It would strengthen U.S. alliances in Asia against threats not just from North Korea but also from China and increase the costs to Beijing of subsidizing the Kim regime. It would not risk hundreds of thousands of American lives with a preventive military attack. And it would strengthen the United States' hand at the negotiating table in a way that primed Washington for success, but also prepared it for failure. 🌐