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Interview with Admiral Dennis C. Blair

HOW LIKELY IS A MILITARY CONFLICT WITH NORTH KOREA?

JUDY WOODRUFF: We return to our lead story, North Korea.

We want to explore what options are before the Trump administration, and get some insights into the reclusive North Korean regime.

That comes from retired U.S. Navy Admiral Dennis Blair. He served as commander of American forces in the Pacific, and later as President Obama's first director of national intelligence. And Sue Mi Terry, she spent seven years as a senior Korea analyst at the CIA, and later as a director on the National Security Council.

And we welcome both of you back to the NewsHour.

I'm going to start with you, Admiral Blair.

More tough language just in the last few hours from President Trump. How do you size up where this situation stands right now?

ADM. DENNIS BLAIR (RET.), Former Commander, U.S. Pacific Command: Well, like many administrations, this administration believes that when it becomes aware of a problem, it's the first time that the problem ever existed.

And those of us who have been dealing with North Korea for many years know that its hyperbolic, threat-laced language, it's nothing new. That's simply the way it talks. It has a very small military capability, with – and talks loud, for both deterrence and to try to intimidate.

And the military facts are that it's very limited in what it can do. So, I am unimpressed by this level of talk. You have to look at the underlying military situations, which hasn't changed, which is very much in the American and South Korean and Japanese favor. This is not new, Judy.

JUDY WOODRUFF: So, Sue Mi Terry, how are things different this time?

SUE MI TERRY

, Former CIA Analyst: Well, I think, honestly, the wild card here is Mr. Trump, because, as Admiral Blair said, those of us who have been following North Korean issues for a very long time, we understand that this is how North Korea behaves, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong-un, and before that Kim Il-Sung.

This is how North Koreans behave. So, the wild card here is Mr. Trump, with his rhetoric, very increased rhetoric. But, honestly, at the end of the day, I'm not sure, even though we say military option is on the table, if that is something that is really realistic at this juncture, because North Korea is a nuclear power already.

And they have conventional artillery forces – I mean, artillery pieces over 10,000 within 60 seconds of Seoul. And there are 22 million people living in Seoul. We have 300,000 Americans living in South Korea, never mind 28,5000 American soldiers in Korea and Japan and so on.

So, I think Mr. Trump putting himself out there on ledge like this just really increases the risk of, you know, blundering into a conflict that no one really wants.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Is that what you see, Admiral Blair, that could happen? You said a minute ago the North Koreans have a small capability. What do you think the prospects are for a conflict?

ADM. DENNIS BLAIR: I think the prospects for a conflict are really very low.

The facts are known by both the United States and Korea are that if Korea starts a conventional military conflict, they lose, they lose – North Korea loses. The regime – dictator loses his life. If they were to use a nuclear weapon against Korea – or South Korea or Japan, much less the United States, we would retaliate with nuclear weapons.

They may have 15 or 20. We have about 2,000. And it's the end of the regime. And this is not a suicidal regime. They operate very cleverly, just below the level of major war or major provocation, which they know they would lose, and we are seeing more of that now. So I don't rate the chances of conflict as high.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Sue Mi Terry, you met recently with representatives of North Korea, the DPRK.

What is your assessment of them and their attitude right now, even though you obviously can't talk to them this minute?

SUE MI TERRY: Right.

No, I think North Koreans are bent on completing their nuclear program. Kim Jong-un is bent on completing his nuclear arsenal that his father and grandfather had pursued, at the cost of millions of dollars and billions of lives.

And that, I don't think North Koreans are ready to give up. They're not going to give up nuclear weapons. They have said over and over explicitly they are not going to give it up. It's not up for negotiation anymore.

Maybe Kim Jong Il, his father, was willing to negotiate to get some concessions, but I don't think that's not longer the case. I think Kim Jong-un will complete the program. They said that they are going to continue with testing, even an

ICBM test, which they have followed through with that threat.

So, I think they will continue with this path.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Given that, Admiral Blair, do you see a way out?

ADM. DENNIS BLAIR: I see the way out as intensification of the current set of measures we're taking with North Korea. We don't accept them as a threat, as a nuclear state, despite the reality of their having a nuclear capability.

We squeeze them very hard economically. And the new set of U.N. sanctions are good. We're always ready to talk to them in case they want to actually change the course of their policy. We keep our military defenses, both conventional and nuclear, strong, and we wait for this terrible, brutal dictator, who has oppressed his people, his family has oppressed the people, to fall, which he eventually will, as other dictators have.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Sue Mi Terry, how do you see this playing out?

SUE MI TERRY: I agree with Admiral Blair's assessment completely.

I think we need to continue with our pressure, our sanctions, even if we have to go after a secondary boycott against Chinese banks and entities that do illicit business with North Korea to keep on the pressure on the Chinese. We have to do that.

And I would just add, I think, also, information warfare against the North Korean regime is very important, because, at the end of the day, under this regime, not much is going to change. And we need a different regime coming into North Korea.

And when we say regime change, I'm not talking about a military strike or decapitation at the head. I'm talking about helping North Korean people bring about the change that we need. And that should be the long-term gain.

And, before that, it should be containment, deterrence, and pressure.

JUDY WOODRUFF: And just quickly, Admiral Blair, any doubt in your mind that the U.S. and its allies can deter the North Koreans before they do serious damage, wreak serious havoc on the region or on the U.S.?

ADM. DENNIS BLAIR: I'm very confident of that, Judy.

This dictatorship has a highly refined sense of self-preservation. And attacking the United – conducting a major attack on the United States is a recipe for the end of the regime, not for the continuation.

And if this regime can do anything, it can do what's necessary to survive.

JUDY WOODRUFF: Admiral Dennis Blair, Sue Mi Terry, we thank you both.

SUE MI TERRY: Thank you for having us on. Thank you.

ADM. DENNIS BLAIR: You're welcome, Judy.