



THE JOINT STAFF
WASHINGTON, DC

27 October 2017

The Honorable Ted W. Lieu
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative Lieu:

The Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has been asked by the Secretary of Defense to respond to your letter cosigned with Representative Ruben Gallego regarding expected casualty assessments in a conflict with North Korea, prevention of North Korean retaliation, and humanitarian assistance/disaster response planning post-conflict.

The Joint Force fully supports the economic and diplomatic pressure campaigns Secretary Tillerson is leading with regard to North Korea. We have not seen any change in the offensive posture of North Korea's forces, something we watch carefully. We remain postured to respond in the event of a provocation or conflict, and we have taken all appropriate measures to protect our allies, the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Japan, and U.S. Forces in those countries. Both Secretary Tillerson and Secretary Mattis have stated repeatedly that "all options are on the table." As military professionals, we prepare for all contingencies and continually review our posture and coalition efforts to deter and respond, if necessary, using the full range of military capabilities. In assessing any threat, including North Korea, we prioritize military preparedness in the defense of our homeland, our citizens, our allies, and in the preservation of stability and international peace and security. Answers to the specific questions posed in your letter follow.

Calculating even the roughest "best- or worst-case casualty estimates" for any conventional or nuclear attack is challenging. We continually evaluate what actions North Korea might take, and its capability and capacity to attack the ROK, Japan, or Guam, and in particular Seoul, with long-range artillery, rockets, and ballistic missiles. In addition to being the capital and the ROK's most densely populated city (approximately 25 million residents), Seoul is also just 35 miles from the demilitarized zone. Given Seoul's vulnerability, casualty estimates will vary significantly depending upon the nature, intensity, and duration of a North Korean attack.

Another important factor in calculating casualty estimates is how much advance warning we have before a North Korean attack. More advance warning means that more civilians—U.S., ROK, and other countries'—can reach one of the thousands of underground shelters in the ROK, dramatically increasing their chances of survival.

Further complicating the calculation of casualty estimates is the ability of our ROK-U.S. Alliance forces to respond to a North Korean attack with counter-battery fire and coalition airstrikes, missions for which we train constantly. We can help mitigate the number of casualties and reduce the duration of a North Korean attack by maintaining the readiness of our forces and our ability to respond rapidly and decisively.

The only way to “locate and destroy—with complete certainty—all components of North Korea’s nuclear weapons programs” is through a ground invasion. A classified briefing is the best venue for a detailed discussion of our capabilities to counter North Korea’s ability to respond with a nuclear weapon and to eliminate North Korea’s nuclear weapons located in deeply buried, underground facilities. We would be happy to join the Intelligence Community to address these issues in a classified briefing.

We assess North Korea may consider the use of biological weapons as an option, contrary to its obligations under the Biological and Toxic Weapons Convention. North Korea continues to develop its biological research and development capabilities. North Korea is not a party to the Chemical Weapons Convention, and it has a long-standing chemical weapons (CW) program with the capability to produce nerve, blister, blood, and choking agents, and it likely possesses a CW stockpile. North Korea probably could employ CW agents by modifying a variety of conventional munitions, including artillery and ballistic missiles, though whether it would so employ CW agents remains an open question. A detailed discussion of our capabilities to counter North Korea’s ability to “retaliate with chemical and biological weapons and whether a ground invasion would be required to locate and destroy” them is best held in a classified setting.

Regarding “providing humanitarian aid” to the ROK, Japan, or North Korea during or after conflict, I defer to the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development. The ROK will have primary responsibility for “post-conflict and transitional operations” on the Korean Peninsula, and the Department of State and the U.S. Agency for International Development would have lead for the U.S. Government.

Regarding possible “opposition from China or Russia” to the use of U.S. military force, the Department of Defense maintains a set of up-to-date contingency plans to secure our vital national security interests. These plans account for a wide range of possibilities, including third-party intervention, and address how best to “contain escalation.” There are several key areas where our interests do not diverge significantly, and it is possible both Russia and China may prefer to avoid conflict with the United States, or possibly cooperate with us, at least in those areas where our interests overlap.

I appreciate your continued support of our men and women in uniform. A similar letter has been sent to Representative Lieu.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael J. Dumont". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

MICHAEL J. DUMONT
Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy
Vice Director, Joint Staff