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[Column] The truth about the “80 nuclear weapons”

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A preemptive strike by either Pyongyang or Washington is highly improbable

“Rage,” the new book by Washington Post reporter Bob Woodward, has been drawing much attention these days. The focus is on the truth of its quote about “80 nuclear weapons.” In an interview with Woodward, former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis said, “The Strategic Command in Omaha had carefully reviewed and studied OPLAN 5027 for regime change in North Korea -- the US response to an attack that could include the use of 80 nuclear weapons.”

A debate has unfolded among major South Korean media over how to interpret this sentence. The Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo, Dong-A Ilbo, and other conservative news outlets saw these 80 nuclear weapons as intended for a retaliatory strike by the US; conversely, the Hankyoreh interpreted them as the weapons that North Korea might use. The questions are the result of the ambiguous wording in the original sentence.

In a Sept. 14 interview with Woodward, US National Public Radio (NPR) broadcaster Mary Louise Kelly asked him to clarify this point. Woodward responded, “I think given North Korea is a rogue nation, they have, as I report, probably a couple of dozen nuclear weapons well-hidden and concealed that it scared Secretary of Defense Mattis so much that he would sleep in his gym clothes. There was a light in his bathroom as he - if he was in the shower and they detected a North Korean launch.” According to Woodward, Mattis was constantly worried that he might have to issue orders for a nuclear strike on North Korea.

Woodward went on to explain that US President Trump had “authorized Secretary of Defense Mattis on his own to shoot it [a North Korean missile] down. If Kim [Jong-un] saw that, he might launch all of his other weapons. I quote Mattis saying, ‘no one has a right to incinerate millions of people,’ but he had to face that. He was not worried that Trump was going to launch against North Korea preemptively. He believes that the problem was Kim Jong-un, the North Korean leader.”

This explanation only compounds the confusion. North Korea is portrayed here as possessing around 24 nuclear weapons, which it could potentially use to incinerate millions of people. The remarks refer to the possibility of escalation -- a North Korean missile launch, a US strike, a massive retaliatory launch by North Korea -- but make no concrete mention of a preemptive strike or counter-strike by the US. The “80 nuclear weapons” are nowhere to be found.

The reference to “80 nuclear weapons” appears to have been problematic to begin with. As of late July 2017, nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker estimated North Korea as having 25 to 30 nuclear weapons; physicist David Albright put the number at 15 to 32, while US intelligence authorities have estimated as many as 60. This was also before it was discovered that North Korea’s intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) are capable of a preemptive strike against the continental US. To be sure, North Korea could have launched strikes against South Korea and Japan even then with short-range or intermediate-range ballistic missiles, but the scenario of North Korea launching 80 nuclear weapons toward the continental US was far-fetched then and remains so now.

US strike against N. Korea poses several technical, geopolitical challenges involving Russia and China

The US possesses more than 80 nuclear weapons, and Trump could push the button at any time if he decides to. But it’s unlikely that the US would completely annihilate North Korea with a preemptive strike of 80 or more nuclear weapons.

Launching an ICBM strike against North Korea would require passing through Russian airspace. If that happens, there is a possibility that Russia will misinterpret it and take action in response. A better alternative would be to use forward-deployed submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs) in Northeast Asia, but this approach could be similarly misinterpreted by China in light of the missiles’ flight angle. Neither approach is a technically simple option. This is why the US’ scenarios for the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea have long

centered on the use of strategic bombers such as the B-2 and B-52. But this too would be by no means simple: transporting 80 nuclear weapons to the region in a short space of time, neutralizing North Korea's air defense network and command and control system, breaking down major air defense network bases with Tomahawk missiles and other weaponry, and finally using the bombers to conduct aerial nuclear weapon drops. An additional issue concerns the need to evacuate US Forces Korea family members and US citizens living in South Korea ahead of time. It is especially difficult to imagine a military action at this scale being decided and carried out with the consent or understanding of the South Korean government.

OPLAN 5027 never about regime change in N. Korea

Let's go back to the beginning. The "OPLAN 5027" quote cited in Woodward's book was not a plan for regime change in North Korea, but an operational plan for a combined South Korea-US response to a large-scale invasion of the South by North Korea; it includes no mention of the use of nuclear weapons. Moreover, OPLAN 5027 had already been replaced by OPLAN 5015 in 2015. As excellent a reporter as Woodward may be, his knowledge of Korean Peninsula issues, nuclear strategy, and operational doctrine are unlikely to transcend the limits of the layperson's perspective. We have no cause for hanging on to every sentence that might appear in his book.

A nuclear weapon is not a magic wand or the "One Ring." It may be easy to talk about using nuclear weapons, but the results are grim. Seventy-five years ago, 70,000 to 80,000 citizens of Hiroshima were killed in an instant when a 13-kiloton atomic bomb was dropped by a US bomber; 69% of the city's buildings were incinerated. As Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev stressed 35 years ago, a nuclear war "can never be won and must never be fought." As we recall the significance of these words, our focus now should not be on using those "80 nuclear weapons," but on eliminating them.



By Moon Chung-in, professor emeritus at Yonsei University

Please direct comments or questions to [english@hani.co.kr]

Moon Chung-in

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