

TIME TO ACCEPT REALITY AND MANAGE A NUCLEAR-ARMED NORTH KOREA

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Anyone following the growing crisis on the Korean Peninsula in recent weeks has been treated to an endless parade of op-eds on what to do about it, written from almost every conceivable angle. Despite the variation among these perspectives, most such proposals remain focused on how to get Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, this objective appears less and less viable with every new North Korean (DPRK) missile and nuclear test. This suggests the need for policymakers in the United States, China, South Korea, and Japan to adopt a more realistic approach focused on deterrence, containment, and an array of crisis management measures. While some nongovernmental observers are beginning to call for this approach, few if any present a clear explanation of either the reasons why such a refocus is needed, what specific key features it should include, or how to carry it out. This is a first step in that direction.

A REALITY CHECK ON NORTH KOREA

The spectrum of suggested responses to the North Korean crisis runs the gamut from attacking Pyongyang in large or small ways—whether as a means of ending the regime, signaling resolve, deterring further escalation, or forcibly ending Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program—to offering North Korean leaders untold numbers and types of carrots—such as a peace treaty, security assurances, and economic aid—to convince them of the life-altering benefits of dismantling their program.

In between lie a variety of mixed approaches, most often centered on a combination of ever greater sanctions (usually seen to require much higher levels of Chinese pressure) and various types of saber rattling, alongside potential freeze deals and assurances. I advocated a version of such proposals myself at an earlier period.

The situation that the world is facing today has evolved, however, particularly regarding North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. A more realistic approach should be based on the following five basic truths, most of which are ignored or downplayed by many political leaders and outside observers alike.

First, the danger of military escalation that could result in a devastating all-out war would exist with any direct use of force against North Korea, however small. In the current situation, there is no such thing as a surgical or limited strike with a low chance of escalation. Any such action would constitute an act of war, inviting major retaliation by an insecure and defiant Pyongyang. Anyone who thinks otherwise is being highly reckless and engaging in wishful thinking.

Moreover, North Korea’s possession of nuclear weapons could increase the likelihood of such retaliation by giving

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the leadership the false impression that it could strike back with little fear of prompting major escalation. And anyone who concludes that the best course of action is therefore to jump to the supposedly inevitable endpoint of any potential clash by launching an all-out war on the peninsula would be thinking even more recklessly and irresponsibly. Such a bloody conflagration could conceivably kill as many Americans and South Koreans as a North Korean nuclear strike would. And a smaller-scale military attack designed to simply destroy Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities is an impossibility, given the large number of underground sites involved.

Second, no use of force or other high-risk option against North Korea would offer any chance of success, however small, without the full and willing support of South Korea (ROK). Without such support, a U.S. attack on North Korea would likely shatter, or at the very least greatly weaken, the alliance, undermining, in the short term, efforts to control escalation and successfully conclude such a conflict while creating enduring resentment and anger toward the United States.

Moreover, regardless of the outcome of this hypothetical war, the resulting badly damaged U.S.-ROK alliance and resulting loss of U.S. credibility as a trustworthy ally would greatly increase the likelihood that Seoul, and then quite possibly Tokyo, would eventually acquire nuclear weapons. Such a regional security environment would be far more unstable than the current one, marked by the United States; China; a likely reunified, nuclear-armed Korea; and a nuclear-armed Japan maneuvering for an advantage, with high levels of suspicion on all sides.

Third, despite its highly inflammatory rhetoric and the Alice-in-Wonderland features of its political system, Pyongyang is not suicidal. Its leaders understand that the United States could extinguish North Korea in a matter of minutes and would do so if a DPRK nuclear missile struck even one U.S. city. Therefore, Pyongyang is not about to launch an unprovoked, out-of-the-blue nuclear attack on the United States.

Rather, the major dangers posed by North Korea's nuclear weapons arise from the possibility of misperception and miscalculation. These risks could most likely be the result of a perceived existential threat emanating from Washington,

or a rapidly escalating conventional clash initiated by Pyongyang under the mistaken belief that its nuclear weapons would deter any U.S./ROK military response. Under such conditions, Pyongyang might eventually resort to serious nuclear threats, prompting a U.S. preemptive strike.

These dangers speak more to the need to greatly reduce threat perceptions and strengthen crisis management measures vis-à-vis North Korea than the need to eradicate Pyongyang's nuclear weapons before they can strike the U.S. mainland.

Fourth, no assurance exists today or for the foreseeable future that Pyongyang would give up its nuclear weapons under the most draconian sanctions regime possible, a mix of sanctions and assurances, or even an assurances-only approach. North Korea's nuclear weapons program is now almost certainly too far developed and serves too many vital purposes for the regime to abandon it as a result of greater pressure and/or more extensive incentives.

The North Korean leadership views its nuclear weapons as more than just a deterrent against attack. They are also a symbol of the potency and status of the DPRK regime, a domestic propaganda tool, a source of leverage for extorting benefits from other countries, and a potential direct source of political influence and economic growth via the export of nuclear materials and technology.

Hence, even with full Chinese cooperation on UN sanctions and/or hand-on-heart U.S. security and/or aid assurances, Pyongyang would almost certainly cling to the benefits it receives from its nuclear capabilities rather than take the clear security and other risks involved in abandoning them. Indeed, the determination of the North Korean regime was reflected in a private remark recently made to a colleague by a DPRK official: "We will go to any lengths not to give up our nuclear weapons."¹

In addition, despite such bravado, it is highly unlikely that more onerous outside sanctions would create such deprivation. Reports from knowledgeable sources strongly suggest that the North Korean economy is more resilient today in the face of outside pressure than during the famine of the 1990s, due to the widespread expansion of private economic activity and the growth of indigenous production in many key industrial sectors.²

Fifth, despite the above observations, the United States, its allies, and most of the international community cannot just accept the idea of a permanently nuclear-armed North Korea and adjust accordingly. Given the insecure and hostile nature of the DPRK regime, any open acceptance of such a status would raise the likelihood of war in Asia, increase the possibility that other aggressive states and terrorists might obtain nuclear weapons, and weaken U.S. extended deterrence with South Korea, Japan, and possibly other allies, thereby increasing the chances that they might acquire nuclear weapons of their own. Hence, the international community must continue to work to deter and contain North Korea's nuclear capabilities, regardless of the short-term prospects of fully eradicating its weapons program.

SHIFTING GEARS: DETERRENCE, CRISIS MANAGEMENT, AND CONFIDENCE BUILDING

The above five factors strongly suggest that any effective approach to the Korean nuclear crisis must replace the current primary emphasis on ridding North Korea of its nuclear weapons before Pyongyang acquires a clear-cut capability to strike the U.S. homeland. Instead, policymakers should aim to develop a less urgent, long-term strategy designed to minimize North Korea's capacity and willingness to utilize those weapons and related technologies in threatening ways, while also continuing to work toward eventual denuclearization. In particular, the United States, China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia must focus not only on deterring and containing Pyongyang through clear, strong, consistent, and common diplomatic and military signals. They must also aim to minimize the chances of destabilizing military escalation by building effective crisis management mechanisms (CMMs) and channels of communication, while also implementing some confidence-building measures (CBMs) toward Pyongyang to reduce its insecurity.

Such CMMs and containment measures should include:

- A direct crisis management channel between trusted senior officials or high-level representatives of the senior leaderships in China, South Korea, and the United States;
- Communication links between key intelligence agencies in China, South Korea, and the United States to

share information on North Korean nuclear weapons development and possible proliferation activities, communicate sensitive messages, and confirm specific actions that each side may take in a crisis;

- Agreed-upon procedures for detecting and preventing any attempt by Pyongyang to transfer nuclear weapons materials, know-how, and technologies;
- A military-to-military dialogue about how to de-conflict Chinese, South Korean, and U.S. special forces in the event of a loose-nukes scenario in North Korea resulting from a fracturing or breakdown of the DPRK regime.

In addition, the United States and China should assure one another that, in any potential Korea crisis: 1) neither side would seek to benefit at the expense of the other, 2) both sides would provide full information and notification before any action would be taken, and 3) nothing would be done to change the situation on the ground over the long term.

In the deterrence realm, critical actions should include a greatly strengthened ballistic missile defense network in the United States, South Korea, and Japan, as well as a more integrated intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance system that includes both China and Russia, if possible. Containment measures should consist of a more extensive and focused version of the existing Proliferation Security Initiative in effect since 2003 (again, including China) to prevent Pyongyang from exporting nuclear machinery and technology.

CBMs toward Pyongyang should include, as a first step, a freeze on its missile and nuclear testing, as well as its conventional military exercises, in return for a suspension of U.S. and South Korean exercises and perhaps a partial easing of sanctions. This should serve as a prelude toward an eventual capping of the North Korean nuclear weapons program in return for movement toward a peace treaty and diplomatic recognition. If Pyongyang refuses such an understanding, the United States should then consider redeploying tactical nuclear weapons on its naval vessels in Northeast Asia, as well as other measures designed to strengthen deterrence and reassure U.S. allies.

Creating such a regime and set of understandings will require significant changes in the mind-sets and approaches of the

powers concerned, especially those of China and the United States. Beijing has thus far refused to discuss with Washington or other powers either crisis contingencies or possible deterrence and/or containment measures, due to a sensitivity about how North Korea might react, a fear that such actions would result in the eventual replacement of the Pyongyang regime by a unified Korean government closely allied with the United States, and the misplaced belief that security assurances will eventually entice the North Koreans to give up their nuclear weapons.

For its part, Washington resists any actions that detract attention from greater pressure in the service of denuclearization. In this respect, President Donald Trump seems only concerned with developing ways to coerce or entice Beijing and Seoul into applying supposedly irresistible pressure on Pyongyang before it acquires the capability to strike the U.S. homeland—a dangerous, misdirected, one-dimensional strategy that is almost certainly destined to fail.

To move both powers toward an emphasis on containment and crisis management, analysts in and out of both the Chinese and U.S. governments, as well as those of South Korea and Japan, need to stop telling their respective political leaderships that they can coerce, force, or entice Pyongyang into abandoning its nuclear weapons in any foreseeable time frame, if ever. In such a high-stakes situation, policy should not be based on extremely low-probability outcomes and certainly should not operate under a self-imposed, short-term deadline.

Washington and Seoul should also work together to revive earlier efforts to convince Beijing to hold talks on crisis contingencies and CMMs, on the likely assumption that Pyongyang's recent missile and nuclear tests in defiance of Beijing's strong urgings may have reduced China's resistance to such moves. To facilitate this effort, both nations should also address Beijing's long-term concerns by expressing a clear willingness to discuss the future political and security

status of a unified Korean Peninsula, including the size and presence of any U.S. forces. This could significantly increase China's willingness to cooperate in a deterrence and containment regime.

Once progress is made in the above areas, the United States, South Korea, China, and Japan should begin talks on the possible features of a stable, long-term deterrence and confidence-building regime on the Korean Peninsula. Even if all sides agree to such an undertaking, it will not prove an easy task to implement, as it requires agreed-upon military, economic, and diplomatic postures sufficient to deter major North Korean provocations without causing Pyongyang to overreact and lash out at a perceived existential threat. Hence, some limited reassurances will likely prove necessary in addition to the above CBMs, such as a formal no-first-use conventional and nuclear force agreement between North Korea and China, South Korea, and the United States.

Finally, throughout this process, the powers concerned should maintain their demand for North Korea to move toward eventual denuclearization, as follow-on to an eventual peace treaty and diplomatic normalization. But that eventual objective will remain as a likely long-term effort.

None of the above recommendations will be easy to achieve. But transitioning as soon as possible away from efforts to denuclearize North Korea in short order to a more realistic focus on deterrence, containment, and crisis management would stand a far better chance of creating a stable and peaceful Korean Peninsula not only in the immediate future but for the long term as well.

NOTES

1. This remark was made during a private conversation in 2016.
2. Jeff Baron, "What if Sanctions Brought North Korea to the Brink? 'Well, in 1941 . . .,'" 38 North, September 7, 2017, <http://www.38north.org/2017/09/jbaron090717/>.

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