

# The Kim Question

## The US and Its Allies Face Up to a Nuclear North Korea

Cover Story

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For decades, both North Korea and the United States have in their own way thwarted efforts to resolve the threat of a nuclearized North Korea. Both have cheated on, or failed to fulfill, past agreements to bring a halt to Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Under Kim Jong Un, North Korea has achieved a level of nuclear and missile development that has finally caught the eye of Washington and the American public. Is peace still possible?

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# How to Overcome Crisis? Washington Must Rethink Its North Korea Dilemma

## By Muthiah Alagappa

**Underlying Washington's present dilemma regarding North Korea is its focus on nuclear weapons as the primary problem and its demand that denuclearization must precede negotiation.**

**But this conflates symptom and cause, argues Muthiah Alagappa, as nuclear weapons are not the primary driver of the Korean conflict.**

*"North Korea best not make any more threats against the United States: They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen."*  
— US President Donald J. Trump, Aug. 8, 2017

WASHINGTON IS FACING a North Korea dilemma. Its objective of denuclearizing North Korea and its coercive strategy — harsh rhetoric, combined military exercises and tightening sanctions — seem contradictory. Washington's emphasis on this strategy appears to have increased rather than decreased Pyongyang's resolve to acquire nuclear weapons and associated delivery capabilities. The more Washington ratchets up its coercive strategy, the more likely it is to face the prospect of a major war.<sup>1</sup>

Washington's dilemma arises from its commitment to denuclearize North Korea and making denuclearization a precondition for dialogue. It views sanctions and the Chinese role in enforcing them as key to achieving that objective.<sup>2</sup> However, both the objective and strategy are flawed. Pyongyang's commitment to the development of a nuclear-weapons capability is firmly rooted in its insecurity and the perception that the US and South Korea are out to undermine and eventually overthrow North Korea's totalitarian regime. It has come to view nuclear weapons and the capability to strike the US as the ultimate guarantors of its national and regime security. The fate of Saddam Hussein's non-nuclear Iraq and the equivocal approach of Washington when dealing with nuclear-weapons states underlie Pyongyang's attachment to its nuclear-weapons capability. Much like Pakistan before, Pyongyang

<sup>1</sup> The earlier strategic patience seems to have been to Pyongyang's advantage, showing that denuclearization can't be achieved by peaceful means when a country perceives an existential threat.

<sup>2</sup> The most recent sanctions regime was passed unanimously by the UN Security Council on Aug. 7, 2017, by a 15-0 vote, with

China and Russia supporting the "most stringent set of sanctions on any country in a generation" (Nikki Haley, US Ambassador to the UN). North Korea was already subject to a series of US sanctions and six rounds of UN sanctions. These appear not to have altered Pyongyang's behavior.

is willing to pay any price for that capability. It is pertinent to recall here that the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto is reputed to have asserted: "If India builds the bomb, we will eat grass or leaves, even go hungry, but we will get one of our own." Economic sanctions will thus not work. In fact, tightening sanctions over the years has increased Pyongyang's resolve. Further tightening of sanctions could lead to war, the consequence of which would be disastrous.

### CHINA IS NOT THE ANSWER

Likewise, reliance on China is unlikely to produce the desired outcome. Policy-makers in Washington often cite Beijing's relatively high trade volume with Pyongyang to argue that if China enforces sanctions, North Korea would have to comply and move in the direction of denuclearization. However, this line of argument fails to take note that nuclear weapons in North Korea are intricately linked to national and regime security and that the international community is only concerned about North Korea because it possesses that capability. Economic sanctions are unlikely to succeed against countries that perceive existential threats. Even if it enforces sanctions, Beijing cannot make Pyongyang give up its nuclear-weapons capability. One should also not forget that China is perceived as a latent threat in North and South Korea. Beijing, too, may see tensions between North Korea and the US and the inability of Washington to act as a way of cutting the US down to size in Northeast Asia and projecting itself as the sober power. China has its own geopolitical agenda that may not be in line with the agenda of the US. Beijing may also deploy the leverage it is presumed to have to its advantage by linking its North Korea policy to issues like trade with the US that is of vital importance to China. Thus, reliance on China does not appear to be sound policy.

### MILITARY OPTION NOT VIABLE

The option of a preventive military strike on North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities that is often paraded as an element in an "all options are on the table" strategy carries high

risks. Such action against North Korea may have been a viable option a decade ago but it is no longer the case. In the last decade or so, and especially in the last few years, Pyongyang has made substantial progress in developing its nuclear-weapons and missile capabilities. It is unclear if a preventive strike can take out all of Pyongyang's weapons and missile capabilities. Anticipating such a strike, Pyongyang could initiate its own pre-emptive military strike with nuclear and conventional capabilities setting Seoul ablaze with high probability of military strikes on other targets in South Korea, Japan and possibly the US, inflicting massive casualties. That would appear to be tantamount to committing suicide. However, when so compelled, Pyongyang would have little to lose. If it fears a preventive military strike that could decapitate or destroy it, a pre-emptive military strike in that context does not seem irrational. Thus, a preventive military strike on North Korea is not a viable option.

An unprovoked pre-emptive strike by North Korea on the US or its allies would also be disastrous. The assumption here is that Pyongyang will not attempt to launch such an attack of its own volition, because that will be committing suicide by choice.

### WAR ISN'T NECESSARY OR IMMINENT

That a military strike by either party would have undesirable outcomes for both implies that war of any kind is not imminent. If Washington could live for decades with the former Soviet Union and now with Russia and China, which possess thousands of warheads and missile delivery capabilities to strike any part of the US, it certainly can do so with Pyongyang with its relatively limited capabilities. Further, Pyongyang is no more evil than the former Soviet Union or Vladimir Putin's Russia. Moving in such a direction, however, requires Washington to explicitly or implicitly acknowledge North Korea as a nuclear-weapons state with missile capabilities to strike against the mainland US. That North

<sup>3</sup> “Rex Tillerson: US-North Korea dialogue could give the regime the security they seek,” *Washington Examiner*, Aug. 15, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> On the conception of sovereignty in East Asia, see Moon Chung-in and Chun Chaesung, “Sovereignty: Dominance of the Westphalian Concept and Implications for Regional Security,” in Muthiah

Alagappa, ed. *Asian Security Order: Instrumental and Normative Features* (Pala Alto, CA: Stanford University Press), 2003.

Korea is a nuclear-weapon state is a foregone conclusion, although some in official circles and think tanks in Washington still appear to be in denial. If North Korea is acknowledged as a nuclear-weapons state, then the key is to ensure an effective capability and strategy to deter and contain it as well as assure allies in Northeast Asia of Washington’s extended deterrence commitment and capability. This is a challenge that deserves immediate attention. Strategies against a nuclear North Korea should be considered and communicated in a serious manner. They must include dialogue with Pyongyang to manage crisis situations and to prevent accidental and undesired wars. The deep distrust that exists between Washington and Pyongyang would make this difficult but must be bridged.

#### THE CORE ISSUES

The longer-term challenge is to defuse the conflict on the Korean Peninsula, which is essentially political. Nuclear weapons are not the problem, as commonly perceived in the US. The US focus on nuclear weapons and missile capabilities of North Korea misses the central issues of the conflict. The conflict also is not a consequence of the absence of a peace treaty among parties to the 1953 war. The conflict may have its origins in the struggle against Japanese colonial rule and the Cold War. However, the present problem is rooted in the division of the Korean nation into two hostile states and the insecurity of the Kim regime. Despite being members of the United Nations, neither country recognizes the other’s legitimacy. The two Koreas see the division as unnatural. Envisioning unification on their own terms, both seek the destruction of the other. There is little or no common understanding on the identity of a unified Korea or its political and economic systems as well as its international orientation. Defusing that conflict requires addressing these difficult issues. The two Koreas must directly undertake this task with the support of the US and other relevant members of the international community.

The immediate political challenge is to support the co-existence of both Koreas and dis-

vow threats to bring about the end of the North Korean regime, however distasteful that may be. Some earlier US Secretaries of State such as Condoleezza Rice did indeed seek to assure North Korea that US policy is not intended to threaten regime security. The present Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, is on record as saying that the overthrow of the North Korean regime is not the objective of US policy.<sup>3</sup> However, Tillerson weakened his statement by insisting that denuclearization must come first and is a precondition for negotiation. Linking negotiations to denuclearization is a non-starter. To demand that a country should give up its most valuable military asset as a precondition for negotiations is not viable. In any case, the nuclear genie of North Korea is out of the bottle. If assurances that regime overthrow is not the objective are to be taken seriously, all parties must seek to overcome the trust deficit that exists among them. Although deterrence cannot be foregone, the coercive strategy of the US and its South Korean ally must and should be modified to bring North Korea to the negotiating table and to reward good behavior from now on.

#### FUNDAMENTAL POLICY CHANGE NEEDED

Movement forward is only possible if Washington is willing to make fundamental changes to its North Korea policy. This would require reframing the Korean conflict with a consistent focus on the essentially political dimensions of the problem. This approach is in line with the dictum that “all arms including nuclear weapons are symptomatic and not the cause of conflict.” As in Vietnam, US policy misdiagnoses and misstates the real problem on the Korean Peninsula. Washington’s belief that North Korea is an evil and dangerous country that should not be allowed possession of nuclear weapons relates more to non-proliferation goals than the Korean conflict. Washington appears to have conflated the two problems. That, in large measure, accounts for the misdiagnosis of the Korean problem and the dangerous situation that presently prevails in Northeast Asia.

Moving forward, Washington should reframe

the Korean conflict to prioritize the political dimension of that conflict in the context of the nuclear threat from North Korea. On the nuclear front, it must accept that there is little it can do to reverse North Korea’s capabilities and focus on deterring and containing it, preventing further horizontal and vertical proliferation and reducing the salience of nuclear weapons in the Korean conflict. On defusing the Korean conflict, the following steps are in order:

**Step 1)** Support the legitimacy and co-existence of both Koreas. The US and South Korea should walk back their coercive strategies and engage in normal state-to-state relations with Pyongyang. North Korea should do the same. All parties should refrain from interfering in the domestic situations in North and South Korea unless they pose a dire threat to the vital interests of the countries concerned.

**Step 2)** A peace agreement among all parties concerned must replace the present armistice on the Korean Peninsula.

**Step 3)** With the support of the US and other relevant countries, North and South Korea should engage directly to address issues related to the division of the Korean nation and its eventual unification, if that is the preferred course of action. It is important for both Koreas to recognize that division of the Korean nation is not unnatural. There were several Korean kingdoms before, and there can be one Korean nation but several Korean states now and in the future. Peaceful co-existence is key. If unification is the preferred option, then the two Koreas should explore the possible means as well as the identity of a unified Korea along with its political and economic systems as well as its international orientation. Unification is not the only way forward. The two Koreas could co-exist as separate states or be part of one state, with each exercising sovereignty on certain matters. The idea of sovereignty and how it is exercised needs to be rethought to enable greater flexibility in the conceptions of nation and state.<sup>4</sup> All other countries must commit themselves to accepting the outcomes negotiated by Seoul and Pyongyang. The process must be peaceful.

**Step 4)** Washington should develop effective strategies to deter North Korea without provoking it and demonstrate its extended deterrence commitment and capabilities to its Northeast Asia allies. Subsequently the US, South Korea, Japan, North Korea, China and Russia should enter into a dialogue on deterrence and containment on the Korean Peninsula as well as develop mechanisms to manage crisis situations on the peninsula.

Making fundamental changes to policy is not easy. However, fundamental changes are necessary to overcome the present crisis and pave the way for peace, security and stability on the Korean Peninsula and, more generally, in Northeast Asia.

#### SOVEREIGNTY COMPROMISED

As an aside, it is pertinent to note that the deep alliance between the US and South Korea has compromised the sovereignty of both countries, especially that of South Korea. The US has been drawn into a conflict and possibly a war situation in the defense of an ally, possibly at great cost to itself. However, as the major ally and provider of security, the US retains the right to decide when and how to retaliate against North Korea. That accords greater flexibility to Washington. Seoul, however, has been reduced to an appendage of Washington and a pawn in the game. It is unable to fashion its own strategy to deal with the Korean conflict. It has indeed become trapped by the alliance. The crisis demonstrates the strengths and weaknesses of the alliance relationship.

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