



POLICY ROUNDTABLE: Are There any Good Choices When it Comes to North Korea?

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1. Introduction: North Korea is Still the Land of Lousy Options

Van Jackson

North Korea has become the most pressing security threat facing the Trump administration. It can now strike U.S. territory in the Pacific — and perhaps even the continental United States — with nuclear-armed ballistic missiles. North Korea has long been known as the “land of lousy options,” and a bipartisan failure of U.S. foreign policy spanning every presidential administration since the end of the Cold War would seem to demonstrate as much. But what should be done?

Charting a near-term and long-term path forward requires answering some basic questions that have mostly eluded the public debate on North Korea policy. This roundtable aims to rectify that. Each of the contributors to this discussion the problem North Korea poses in broadly similar terms, they reveal some divergences on what U.S. goals should be and how to achieve them.

The End-State

Should the United States be pursuing denuclearization of North Korea? Kyle Haynes of Purdue University argues that it is a dangerous “pipe dream.” John Warden of SAIC and Vincent Manzo of CNA assume Haynes is right, jumping directly to the problem of damage limitation and deterrence. Adam Mount of the Federation of American Scientists agrees that denuclearization is unachievable, but maintains that the United States cannot entirely abandon that goal because of the potentially damage to U.S. alliances and the global nuclear nonproliferation regime. Kelly Magsamen of the Center for American

Progress avers the question of denuclearization, but advocates prioritizing deterrence and containment.

Striking a tone that is neither optimistic or pessimistic on denuclearization, Stephan Haggard of the University of California-San Diego urges focusing on the near term. By focusing primarily on current events, Haggard's analysis takes a different tack than Mount but ends up in a similar place: The United States should avoid chasing denuclearization with any kind of urgency, but neither does it have to abandon it as a long-term goal. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Patrick Cronin of the Center for a New American Security writes in favor of the Trump administration's end-state of denuclearization, a goal that every president since the end of the Cold War as sought.

But if denuclearization is unachievable, what should be the aim of U.S. policy toward North Korea? All the authors agree that the United States cannot afford to be single-minded, and must instead manage multiple priorities that occasionally compete with each other.

There is also a consensus that slowing or halting North Korea's progress in developing nuclear weapons is not only advisable but essential. Deterrence of major conflict and regional stability are also high on everyone's list, though those goals immediately raise the question of how they are best achieved.

The Approach

The contributors diverge most on the means of U.S. strategy. Cronin broadly supports the Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure" toward North Korea, but believes

there must be a point at which the United States pivots to diplomatic engagement for the policy to pay off. Denuclearization, he argues, will not happen except through diplomacy. Haggard, Magsamen, and Mount, despite harboring objections to “maximum pressure,” find common cause with Cronin in supporting pressure that takes the form of economic sanctions, if not the administration’s talk of war. Magsamen and Mount in particular both advocate shifting to a strategy that deters North Korea while making the regime’s life as difficult as possible — by using coalitional diplomacy to deny the regime any financial, technical, or political benefits as long as it retains a hostile nuclear posture.

The other contributors also find fault with “maximum pressure” and support dialogue with North Korea in their own ways, but emphasize military capabilities to a greater degree than Haggard. Warden and Manzo in particular provide an elaborate analysis that concludes the United States ought to be pursuing damage limitation capabilities, including long-range precision-strike weapons and ballistic missile defenses. They believe the combination of superior offensive and defensive conventional military capabilities will better strengthen deterrence and mute any rash overconfidence that North Korea’s nuclear arsenal might otherwise endow it with.

Attacking North Korea

Two questions have dominated news coverage about the Trump administration’s North Korea policy. Is denuclearization worth starting a war over? And should the United States give North Korea a “bloody nose?” Sen. Lindsey Graham has argued that a war in Korea

would be preferable to allowing North Korea to retain nuclear weapons.¹ Magsamen gives the most elaborate attack on the fallacious reasoning that leads to such a conclusion, but each contributor to this roundtable shares her view, at least implicitly. A preventive war against North Korea would be a war of choice, and the ultimate failure of national security policy. Similarly, none advocate for limited strikes of any kind unless North Korea attacks first. The proactive use of military force is here incongruent with the priority of deterrence.

Lingering Doubts

Three lingering questions give reason for enduring pessimism about the ability to achieve much more than deterrence of major conflict. First, on what basis can Washington expect to establish credible commitments with Pyongyang? Cronin, Magsamen, Mount, Haggard, and Haynes all urge strategies that require negotiations with North Korea to freeze or rollback its nuclear program, but none provide either evidence or a rationale that would allow us to believe in negotiations. Indeed, North Korea's long history of violating its own commitments raises valid concerns about the ability to build any future on a negotiated settlement. This does not mean that negotiations are impossible, but advocating for them requires a significant burden of proof rather than faith.

Second, how can coercion produce a sustainable outcome? Haggard, Magsamen, and Mount stress diplomacy to a greater degree than the other contributors, yet even they

¹ Uri Friedman, "Lindsey Graham: There's a 30% Chance Trump Attacks North Korea," *The Atlantic* (December 14, 2017), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/lindsey-graham-war-north-korea-trump/548381/>.

support an extensive campaign of pressure on North Korea. Given Pyongyang's history of responding to pressure with pressure,² it is unclear why we should believe that any strategy requiring a squeeze of North Korea will yield a desirable long-term change in either Pyongyang's behavior or its strategic calculations. As one of the seminal works on deterrence long ago observed, deterrence is a means of buying time, not an end in itself.³ We should all be troubled by the consensus among contributors here that deterrence is America's most important priority in Korea. At best, deterrence enables a strategy that ameliorates the conditions that give rise to the need for deterrence in the first place. But no such strategy has been proposed.

The deterrence imperative itself leads to a final reason for pessimism. What must the United States do, and avoid doing, in order to deter major conflict? Haggard avers this question entirely. Cronin and Mount also stay relatively silent on it, though they believe deterrence is a foremost priority. Magsamen offers plausible ingredients for a deterrence strategy — containment, pressure, diplomacy, and alliance management — but the relative importance of each factor is unclear. Haynes suggests that proportionality between threats and goals matters, but does not specify how threats should be levied or bounded. Warden and Manzo provide the greatest detail in justifying their theory of deterrence — a mix of precision-strike capabilities will mitigate any advantage North Korea seeks in resorting to nuclear conflict and therefore deter it from doing so. But this theory rests on a questionable assumption, that North Korea will perceive the balance of forces accurately and draw the conclusions from U.S. capabilities that we wish them to

² Van Jackson, *Rival Reputations: Coercion and Credibility in US-North Korea Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

³ Alexander George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 5.

draw. If Warden and Manzo’s assumption is incorrect, their prescription will actually undermine crisis stability and prime deterrence to fail.

Takeaways

If there is anything that Trump administration officials can take away from this expert discussion, it should be that diplomacy has popular backing, even if it goes nowhere. Deterrence is achievable, and preferable to a war of choice. And just because North Korea remains the “land of lousy options” does not make it any more reasonable for policy to drift toward “bloody noses” and preventive wars. Mere talk of it is ill-advised. To the extent it reflects the administration’s true intentions, it represents an egregious mismatch between ends and means. If, by contrast, war talk is nothing more than coercive bluffing, it is doomed to fail and risks eroding U.S. credibility in the process.

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2. Maximum Pressure: A Clarifying Signal in the Noise of North Korea Policy

Patrick M. Cronin

At the height of the Roman Empire two thousand years ago, the Stoic philosopher Seneca counseled that any quest for a fulfilling life should begin with a clear objective: “Our plans miscarry because they have no aim. When a man does not know what harbour he is making for, no wind is the right wind.”⁴

Seneca may as well have been advising policymakers on dealing with North Korea. The objectives of Washington’s North Korea policy run the gamut from the plausible to the unthinkable.

In the main, the Trump administration’s national security team supports the goal of *detering* the outbreak of major war, a bedrock of bipartisan national security policy for 65 years.⁵ Both the Obama and Trump administrations have engaged in various shows of force and enhanced military exercises to underscore deterrence and an ironclad alliance commitment. As America’s top officer in Korea has explained, the purpose of joint U.S.-

⁴ Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*, Volume II, translated by Richard Mott Gummere (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2016; first published by G. P. Putnam’s Sons in 1918), 182.

⁵ For example, speaking to U.S. and ROK troops at Yongsan in Seoul, Secretary of Defense James Mattis explained the purpose of maintaining deterrence: “Ultimately our diplomats have to be backed up by strong soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines.... So they speak from a position of strength, of combined strength, of alliance strength. Shoulder to shoulder, (South Korea) and the US together.” Quoted in Euan McKirdy, “US Defense Secretary James Mattis at Korean DMZ: ‘Our goal is not war,’” *CNN*, October 27, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/10/26/politics/mattis-south-korea-dmz/index.html>.

South Korean exercises is to serve the overriding goal of maintaining “a credible deterrent.”⁶

As North Korea approaches its declared goal of possessing long-range, nuclear-armed missiles, analysts have stressed two different approaches to diplomacy. Some advocate avoiding tension by emphasizing *diplomatic engagement*. Although the engagement element of U.S. North Korea policy remains muted, even President Trump has urged North Korea to “come to the table and make a deal.”⁷ Meanwhile, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has hinted at diplomatic flexibility, provided the ultimate destination remains the denuclearization of the peninsula.⁸ An alternative approach uses diplomacy as a means of compelling Pyongyang to abandon nuclear weapons through *diplomatic pressure* and economic isolation.⁹ This has been a central feature of the Trump administration’s strategy of maximum pressure.

⁶ General Vincent K. Brooks, quoted in Jim Garamone, “Dunford: U.S.-South Korean Alliance Ready to Defend Against North Korean Threat,” *DoD News*, August 14, 2017,

<https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1277384/dunford-us-south-korean-alliance-ready-to-defend-against-north-korean-threat/>.

⁷ Demetri Sevastopulo and Bryan Harris, “Trump Calls on North Korea to ‘Come to the Table and Make a Deal,’” *Financial Times*, November 7, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/8a8eb006-c36a-11e7-b2bb-322b2cb39656>.

⁸ Jesse Johnson, “In a Move That Could Alienate Japan, Tillerson Says Willing to Talk to North Korea ‘Without Preconditions,’” *The Japan Times*, December 13, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/12/13/asia-pacific/apparent-shift-tillerson-says-u-s-willing-talk-north-korea-without-preconditions/#.WkwI2yOZN-U>.

⁹ The Trump administration often declares that the goal of a maximum pressure strategy is the denuclearization of North Korea. For instance, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin cites this objective when explaining the imposition of new sanctions. See “U.S. Announces Sanctions on North Korea Missile

Finally, administration officials have occasionally suggested that deterring war may not be sufficient, and that instead the United States may consider an objective of denying Kim Jong-un nuclear weapons through *military action*, including the possibility of a preventive decapitation strike.¹⁰ President Trump has instructed the Armed Forces to prepare military options should they be necessary. Secretary of Defense James Mattis emphasizes diplomacy, but he has also made clear that the military must prepare for all contingencies: “What does the future hold? Neither you nor I can say, so there’s one thing the U.S. Army can do, and that is you’ve got to be ready to ensure that we have military options that our president can employ, if needed.”¹¹

Yet, policymakers have not reached a consensus on any one of these various approaches (deterrence, diplomatic engagement, diplomatic pressure, and military action). While the fear of nuclear war drives the North Korea issue to the top of many debates, the absence of any broad agreement on the feasible and desirable aims of U.S. and allied North Korea policy contributes to some of the worst-case analyses that often fill our inboxes and

Makers,” *The Guardian*, December 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/27/us-announces-sanctions-on-north-korea-missile-makers>.

¹⁰ Responding to a reporter’s question about preparing for preventive war, National Security Advisor Lt. General H. R. McMaster replied, “The president’s been very clear about it. He said he’s not going to tolerate North Korea being able to threaten the United States.” See David E. Sanger, “Talk of ‘Preventive War’ Rises in White House over North Korea,” *The New York Times*, August 20, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/20/world/asia/north-korea-war-trump.html?_r=0.

¹¹ Robbie Gramer and Paul McLeary, “Trump Touts Military Option for North Korea That Generals Warn Would be ‘Horrific,’” *Foreign Policy*, October 9, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/10/09/trump-touts-military-option-for-north-korea-that-generals-warn-would-be-horrific-war-with-north-korea-nuclear-pentagon-defense-asia-security/>.

social media feeds. Lacking a desirable aim (but leaving plenty of opportunity for error), our North Korea policy seems dangerously adrift.

Aiming for Peace, Order, and Influence

To reach a consensus, we need to begin with a shared understanding of the threat North Korea poses to preserving peace, prosperity, and freedom. From that baseline, we should be doing whatever necessary to prevent Pyongyang from undermining the achievements for which our forebears sacrificed so much.

North Korea's nuclear buildup is a barometer by which to gauge the decline of both the rules-based postwar order and America's influence. Its imminent acquisition of nuclear-tipped missiles capable of hitting the American homeland presently challenges regional and international security.¹² Emboldened by a variety of new military means, the 34-year-old Kim may rely even more on brinkmanship and coercion to disrupt development on and around the peninsula. Such recklessness could trigger war through miscalculation. Even short of war, Pyongyang's success in building an arsenal of nuclear, biological,

¹² While most analysts believe nuclear deterrence could be maintained even if North Korea fielded intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), Senator Lindsay Graham has made clear the concern about letting Kim Jong-un have the ability to strike U.S. territory with nuclear weapons. "Even if it means thousands, hundreds of thousands of people over there get hurt to protect America. Now that's the choice that the president has to make. I stand with him. The best outcome is not to have a war. I don't want a war, he doesn't want a war, but we're not going to let this crazy man in North Korea have the capability to hit the homeland. We're not going to live this way," Senator Graham has said. See Jamie McIntyre and Travis Tritten, "North Korea says new ICBM with 'super-large heavy warhead' completes its nuclear force," *Washington Examiner*, November 29, 2017, <http://www.washingtonexaminer.com/north-korea-says-new-icbm-with-super-large-heavy-warhead-completes-its-nuclear-force/article/2177020>.

chemical, conventional, and cyber weapons could accelerate an arms race in Northeast Asia and lead to the proliferation of deadly new weapons around the globe.

With peace, order, and influence at risk, the United States has several realistic options for dealing with North Korea. This begins with deterring North Korean aggression. We know how to do this. By remaining strong and actively engaged, and working in close concert with our allies, we can continue to preserve the peace. However, because North Korea's threat to regional order transcends the challenge of deterrence, the United States should also seek to use a combination of pressure and diplomacy to contain and eventually eliminate the most pernicious threats to our homeland, our allies, and innocent civilians on the peninsula and elsewhere.

The Logic of Maximum Pressure and Engagement

The Trump administration's North Korea policy is based on a thorough interagency review conducted early in 2017 and managed by a group of seasoned professionals, including the National Security Advisor, Secretary of Defense, and the Commander of U.S. Forces Korea, who also happens to be Commander of the United Nations Command and Combined Forces Command in Korea. The policy of maximum pressure and engagement on which they settled is also anchored in strong alliances with South Korea as well as Japan. President Trump's successful visits to both Tokyo and Seoul in November punctuated the high degree of continuity in America's regional security policy, notwithstanding widespread concerns about U.S. reliability and power.

Because North Korea threatens the world and not simply the United States and its allies, a successful policy requires greater international effort, particularly from China. The

multi-pronged U.S. strategy designed to thwart North Korea's nuclear ambitions centers on the application of ever-greater economic pressure, which in turn requires compelling China to curb trade with Pyongyang. Although China is North Korea's main trading partner, the Trump administration's approach has compelled it to support various sanctions, which include cutting back coal imports from North Korea to agreeing to reduce energy exports to the Kim regime. China prefers to hedge its bets, calibrating the diplomatic support it offers the United States while ensuring that it does not suddenly and dangerously destabilizes the Kim regime.¹³ This latter proclivity may explain, at least in part, December 2017 reports that Chinese ships were seen trading with North Korea on the high seas in contravention of United Nations Security Council resolutions.¹⁴

Trading in a way that appears designed to evade inspection, on the high seas, fuels speculation that China is merely claiming to crack down on North Korea while continuing to support the regime. It is the latest in a history of Chinese transgressions undermining U.S. efforts on North Korea. This leaves the United States with little alternative to

¹³ Kambiz Foroohar and David Tweed, "China to Back Fresh UN Sanctions on North Korea Fuel," *Bloomberg Businessweek*, December 21, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-12-22/china-is-said-to-back-fresh-un-sanctions-on-north-korea-fuel>.

¹⁴ Emily Rauhala, "Trump said China was caught 'red handed' selling oil to North. Beijing denies it did anything wrong," *The Washington Post*, December 29, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/trump-said-china-was-caught-red-handed-selling-oil-to-north-korea-beijing-denies-it-did-anything-wrong/2017/12/29/89bc3a22-ec73-11e7-891f-e7a3c60a93de_story.html?utm_term=.9db949deaaea.

imposing penalties on any entities engaging in illicit trade with North Korea, even China. In other words, more secondary sanctions are required.¹⁵

Without diplomacy to contain North Korea's threat and preempt an ever-tightening turning of the screw on North Korea's economy, this dysfunctional pattern will continue as the administration's pressure strategy moves forward. This is likely to beget a tired pattern of U.S.-China jostling over North Korean sanctions: U.S. officials expose instances of China's (and Russia's) illicit trade with North Korea; China denies that it is doing anything illegal; the United States imposes limited secondary sanctions on Chinese entities; and China expresses outrage, combined with a pledge to penalize the offending businesses and curtail trade with North Korea.

Time is Running Out for Whom?

Many contend that time is running out to avert potential conflict on the Korean peninsula.¹⁶ If there is a clock ticking, however, it is ticking most loudly for China. While the United States and South Korea can live with long-term deterrence and defense, China stands to lose the most from a military buildup in Northeast Asia. Over time, the policy consequences of having to deter and contain a nuclear-armed North Korea will harm China.

¹⁵ For an informed way to pursue secondary sanctions as part of a comprehensive pressure strategy, see Bruce Klingner, "How to Stop North Korea: Use the 'Python Strategy,'" The Heritage Foundation, December 5, 2017, <http://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/how-stop-north-korea-use-the-python-strategy>.

¹⁶ See, for example, Carlo Munoz, "H.R. McMaster: Time Running Out for China on North Korea," *Washington Times*, December 12, 2017, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2017/dec/12/hr-mcmaster-time-running-out-for-china-on-n-korea/>.

Can some combination of pressure, especially economic sanctions, and diplomacy avert a future that threatens vital U.S. interests? We will never know unless we try. If North Korea continues deploying nuclear weapons despite a maximum pressure and engagement strategy, the logical next step is deterrence and containment, not a preventive war. A *preemptive attack* on North Korean missiles about to strike the United States or its allies would contain the North Korea threat, and possibly even deter future missile strikes. But that is a world away from a *preventive attack* that targets cold missiles in the ground, which would be more likely to escalate to general war. The resulting catastrophe would be much worse than living for a while longer with a nuclear North Korea.

Survival appears to be the lowest common denominator that unites all regional actors. This irreducible point brings the discussion back to Seneca. Above all else, we must first know what aim we seek to achieve. While there is no more immediate threat to regional peace and security than that posed by North Korea, we should avoid rushing headlong into a war of choice. How successfully Washington manages the North Korea problem – mostly through deterrence and containment, but also through timely diplomacy when the opportunity arises – could well determine the legacy of the Trump administration’s policy in Asia. If we head toward the right port, we should be able to discover favorable winds.

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3. The Trump Administration and North Korea: A Happier New Year?

Stephan Haggard

Despite important developments in North-South relations in the first week of 2018, any analysis of North Korea must begin with the intractable nature of the problem. Kim Jong Un has doubled down on North Korea's nuclear program, dramatically accelerating the pace of missile testing to extend their range and reliability. In his 2018 New Year's address, Kim suggested that the country has "completed" its nuclear program. Although most Western analysts believe there is a fundamental contradiction between pursuit of the country's nuclear program and economic development, Kim Jong Un does not seem to think so. Indeed, in 2013, he rolled out a strategic concept – the so-called *byungjin* line-- which outlined simultaneous pursuit of nuclear weapons and economic reconstruction. To date, the regime has shown little interest in returning to multilateral talks on denuclearization. And even if such talks were to resume – currently a long shot – it would take a substantial amount of time before North Korean capabilities were significantly reduced.

The military options are also frustrating. Secretary of Defense Mattis has no doubt outlined them to President Trump, but preventive action or pre-emption faces a fundamental dilemma. Limited precision strikes would signal the seriousness of U.S. intent, and might be crafted to minimize the risks of all-out retaliation. But such limited strikes would not fundamentally degrade North Korea's program and would certainly not eliminate it entirely. However, a more comprehensive military approach runs risks that would fall largely on our South Korean allies, who have insisted that they be consulted on

any such action. It is wrong to say that the United States has no military options. Nonetheless, the curse of geography – the proximity of North Korean artillery to Seoul – creates limits that are well-understood on both sides.

The optimal approach is therefore one that allows existing initiatives to play out. As implausible as a resolution of the North Korea challenge seems, the broad approach pioneered by the Obama administration and continued in important respects under President Trump might still yield fruit.

Maximum Pressure and Engagement: A Reversion to the Mean?

Given the diplomatic and military constraints, it is not surprising that the Trump administration is pursuing more mainstream approaches to the Korean peninsula for the time being. After a presidential campaign in which Seoul and Tokyo were treated in casual fashion, the administration has undertaken a succession of assurance tours through the two capitals; Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary Mattis, Vice President Mike Pence, and eventually the President himself all made such visits. Yet, not all is well in the two relationships, particularly on the economic front. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is still smarting from his failure to keep the United States in the Transpacific Partnership (TPP) and the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement faces substantial uncertainty. But the president's team has undone at least some of the damage of the campaign, and thanks to North Korea the two Northeast Asian alliances have even strengthened.

The reversion to the diplomatic mean is also evident with respect to core features of strategy toward the North Korea nuclear issue. The Trump administration denounced “strategic patience,” the Obama-era approach that combined diplomatic and economic

pressure with a willingness to resume the Six Party Talks. In fact, the Trump administration's re-christened "maximum pressure and engagement" has, in practice, differed little from strategic patience.

In particular, despite the president's tough talk, Secretary Tillerson has repeatedly restated a willingness not only to talk to North Korea, but to address North Korean – and Chinese – concerns. For example, the secretary has committed to the so-called "Four Nos": that the United States does not seek regime change, collapse, or accelerated unification, and that it has no ambitions to station troops above the 38th parallel were North Korea to suddenly collapse.

Yet the Trump administration's strategy does depart from Obama's in two significant ways. The first is the disquieting tendency on the part of the president to issue challenges and even threats, including personal taunts. Such plain talk could introduce uncertainty and ultimately facilitate talks. Yet many of the president's tweets simply cut against more considered policy pronouncements emanating from elsewhere in the administration, sewing confusion about U.S. objectives and strategy. To the extent they have been threatening, they have probably motivated Kim Jong Un to accelerate his nuclear program rather than to slow it down.

The second change in policy is much more consequential, and must be credited with significantly increasing economic pressure on North Korea. In early 2016, Congress granted the Obama administration wide authority to deploy secondary sanctions, using access to the U.S. financial markets as leverage to punish third parties doing business with North Korea. President Obama was reluctant to fully exploit this authority, but the Trump administration ramped up these efforts over the course of 2017, culminating in a

wide-ranging executive order that granted the administration the authority to target virtually any entity doing business with North Korea. Although probably not enough to constrain North Korea on their own, the secondary sanctions have taken place in the context of shifts in Chinese thinking that are fundamentally changing North Korea's economic prospects.

The China Card

North Korea played a surprisingly important role in efforts to get U.S.-China relations back on track after Trump's early unforced errors on the Taiwan issue. President Trump not only took a congratulatory phone call from Taiwan president Tsai Ing-wen but appeared to back away from the One China policy, a bedrock of US-China relations. The implicit deal coming out of the Mar-a-Lago summit in April was that the administration would put its protectionist economic agenda vis-à-vis China on hold in return for help on North Korea. Evidence that China was taking the issue seriously came in the form of two wide-ranging United Nations Security Council resolutions in 2017 that put an unprecedented squeeze on North Korea. Building on two resolutions passed in 2016, Chinese policy shifted in an important way: For the first time, Beijing agreed to sanction commercial trade, as opposed to goods that could be tied directly to the missile and nuclear programs. Securing Chinese cooperation at the U.N. Security Council has to be viewed as a significant diplomatic win for the Trump administration.

China has always demanded its own quid-pro-quo on North Korea, however. It sees military options as unacceptable and holds that denuclearization must take place through a negotiated settlement that would address the interests of all parties. The Chinese (and Russian) proposal involves a simple trade: North Korea would place a moratorium on its

nuclear and missile testing and the United States US would suspend its annual military exercises with South Korea.

The Trump administration has been rightly reluctant to buy into this idea, but the reason is not just its resemblance to outright extortion. It is unclear how the parties will transition from a short-run confidence building measure—the suspension for suspension-to talks that would actually address the nuclear question. If North Korea wants to hold talks-about-talks only to reveal that they have no intention of discussing their weapons programs, what is the point? Unfortunately, neither the United States nor China has put adequate effort into outlining the parameters of talks, a necessary step for moving them forward.

Until recently, the question was indeed one of strategic patience: How long would it take for sanctions to bring North Korea back to the table? Many analysts believed that China would never let North Korea collapse, that sanctions would never work because of the capacity of the regime to impose costs on its population, or both. To be sure, China has been cautious both in crafting U.N. Security Council resolutions and with respect to enforcement. But the North Korean economy is much more open than it was at the onset of the nuclear crisis in the George W. Bush administration, and much more vulnerable to the gradual squeeze that is currently underway. With Japan and South Korea moving toward embargo, and the patience of other countries drying up, North Korea has become almost entirely dependent on its commercial relationship with China. Even with smuggling and lax enforcement, it is hard to imagine North Korea will not be forced to evaluate its strategy in the face of a sanctions regime that threatens to cut off as much as one half of the country's foreign exchange earnings. Hidden reserves have allowed North Korea to maintain an appearance of normalcy.

But the sanctions pressure on North Korea is clearly starting to have effect. If sustained by China, North Korea could possibly experience an old-fashioned balance of payments crisis as it ran out of the ability to finance its imports. Such a development would have wide-ranging effects across the entire economy.

Developments in the New Year

Kim Jong Un's New Year's address touted the country's nuclear program and was defiant in the face of economic challenges. However, with other diplomatic avenues shut off and the effects of sanctions looming, it was only a matter of time before the regime sought to exploit South Korean President Moon Jae In's deep commitment to engagement.

Predictably, proposals to improve relations carried poison pills. Noting that both the seventieth anniversary of North Korea and the Winter Olympics fall in 2018, for example, Kim issued a more-or-less open threat to the games in his New Year's address: that the physical security of the games could not be guaranteed. The speech went on about solving problems "by ourselves," transparently seeking to diminish the US role and weaken the alliance.

The price tag for North Korea's participation in the Olympics was that the United States and South Korea postpone their upcoming military exercises. Perhaps to the surprise of all involved, the Trump and Moon administrations had the confidence to reach an understanding to delay – although not cancel – upcoming exercises, setting in motion an unanticipated set of events. North and South reopened a hotline and Kim promised a ministerial-level delegation. Initial negotiations sought to focus modestly on the logistics of getting North Korean athletes to Pyeongchang. But given that only a handful of athletes

were qualified for the Games, it was clear that the ambitions of all parties were much wider. Although the United States convened a conference in Canada to coordinate on sanctions, President Trump subsequently endorsed wider North-South talks after some in his administration openly voiced caution.

Where might this go? It has been an open secret since mid-December that the Moon administration was seeking an agreement on the exercises, and that he had discussed the issue during his summit with Xi Jinping after the initial proposal had been made to the United States. The agreement is significant since the guts of the joint Chinese-Russian proposal centers on suspending exercises in return for a suspension of missile and nuclear tests. Chinese authorities have already jumped to the wrong conclusion: that recent developments demonstrate Washington's willingness to endorse China's dual-suspension proposal. That is almost certainly a bridge too far, and South Korea and the United States will almost certainly maintain the pressure on North Korea to come to the table or face continuing isolation. But we should listen to Deng Xiaoping: You cross the water by feeling for the stones. The decision on suspending exercises around the Olympics could well be a stone.

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4. Risk and Reward in the Korean Nuclear Crisis

Kyle Haynes

The ongoing crisis on the Korean peninsula has increased the risk of nuclear war to the highest level in decades, perhaps since the Cuban Missile Crisis. The risk of catastrophic conflict was bound to increase as North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities developed to the point of being able to strike U.S. territory. But many of the Trump administration's critics have highlighted the ways in which the President's bellicose rhetoric has further increased the chances of war in Korea.¹⁷

These critics are correct – Trump's threats do make war more likely. But the substance of these criticisms is misplaced, or at least incomplete. The Trump administration has badly erred, but not because it has made threats that risk inadvertent escalation. Risk is an unavoidable, indeed an *essential* component of coercive diplomacy. Rather, American threats have foolishly focused on the pipe dream of denuclearization instead of more attainable goals like deterring North Korean aggression and limiting the growth of its nuclear and ICBM capabilities.

In coercive diplomacy, risk is essential to any reward. But by focusing on unattainable objectives, the administration is mismatching ends and means, disproportionately raising the risk of war while promising very little payoff in return. In short, many of the Trump

¹⁷ Delury, John. "Take Preventive War with North Korea Off the Table." *Foreign Affairs*. (August 22, 2017). Available at: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2017-08-22/take-preventive-war-north-korea-table>

administration's tactics can be found in the standard coercive diplomacy playbook. But these tactics are being badly misapplied in pursuit of objectives that are either trivial or completely unattainable.

A better strategy requires a more measured, disciplined use of threats designed to accomplish important, but achievable policy goals. Below, I lay out a set of core American objectives in the North Korean crisis, and highlight those that are realistic enough to warrant the substantial risk of catastrophic war.

American Objectives

The United States should have four principal security objectives on the Korean peninsula. The first is denuclearization, which would entail the removal of nuclear weapons from North Korea's military arsenal. The second is a more limited variant of the first: to slow, stop, or otherwise limit the development of North Korea's nuclear and long-range missile capabilities. The third is to deter any aggression that North Korea might seek to commit under the cover of its new nuclear capabilities. The final U.S. objective is to avoid an unacceptably costly war. To date, the administration has only been unequivocal about its pursuit of the first while variously conflating, ignoring, or eliding the other three.

There are fundamental tradeoffs between some of these objectives. In particular, forcefully pursuing the first three necessarily risks sacrificing the fourth. In extremis, the United States is clearly capable of denuclearizing North Korea by force. But doing so would require a massive preventive attack that would kill millions of North Koreans and likely result in retaliatory nuclear strikes on U.S. allies, if not the U.S. homeland. The United States could also radically reduce the short-term risk of conflict by ceasing its

efforts to roll back or limit North Korea's nuclear arsenal, but this would entail abandoning some of Washington's most important regional security objectives.

On the other hand, there are important synergies among these objectives as well. Limiting the development of North Korea's nuclear arsenal makes it easier to deter aggression, and deterring aggression of course reduces the risk of war. In evaluating which of these objectives warrants incurring a heightened risk of potentially cataclysmic war, we must understand these tradeoffs and complementarities, and soberly evaluate the costs, risks, and likelihood of success that each one entails.

Denuclearization

Achieving the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula would yield greater security benefits for the United States than any of the other objectives listed above. It is also the least realistic of these objectives. Nuclear weapons represent the ultimate deterrent and security guarantor for any state. It would be foolhardy for Kim Jong Un to abandon his nuclear deterrent in exchange for security guarantees, as there would be little stopping the United States from renegeing on these guarantees the moment Pyongyang scraps its last nuclear warhead.¹⁸ The North Korean leadership clearly recognizes this, regularly remarking on the irrationality of Muammar Qaddafi, Saddam Hussein, and Ukrainian leaders who voluntarily abandoned their nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons programs, only to be subsequently attacked by foreign adversaries.¹⁹

¹⁸ Fearon, James. "Rationalist Explanations of War." *International Organization*. 49, no. 3 (1995) 379-414; Powell, Robert. "War as a Commitment Problem." *International Organization*. 60, no. 1 (2006): 169-203.

¹⁹ Aspen Security Forum. "At the Helm of the Intelligence Community." (July 21, 2017.) <http://aspensecurityforum.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/At-the-Helm-of-the-Intelligence-Community.pdf>.

Limitation

Limiting the growth of North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities is a realistic objective, but accomplishing it will require the U.S. to make significant concessions, potentially including a peace treaty that formally recognizes the regime in Pyongyang and the cessation of joint military exercises with South Korea.²⁰ Furthermore, Kim Jong Un is unlikely to agree to any limitation that seriously undercuts his ability to deter an unprovoked attack. But North Korea already possesses upwards of 60 operational nuclear warheads, and intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) likely capable of striking the entire United States.²¹ And while its targeting capabilities and reentry vehicles are as yet unproven, North Korea has already reached the point where any would-be attacker runs a substantial risk of suffering nuclear retaliation. As such, Kim Jong Un could soon view his own nuclear deterrent as sufficiently advanced that he would trade away further development for some offsetting concession.

Ellick, Adam and Jonah Kessel. "From North Korea, With Dread." *The New York Times*, November 28, 2017. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/11/28/opinion/columnists/missile-test-north-korea.html?_r=0.

²⁰ Hass, Ryan and Michael O'Hanlon. "Despite H-Bomb Test, Negotiate with North Korea - But from a Position of Strength." *Brookings Institution*. (September 6, 2017). <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/09/06/despite-h-bomb-test-negotiate-with-north-korea-but-from-a-position-of-strength/>.

²¹ Joby Warrick, Ellen Nakashima, and Anna Fifield. "North Korea now making missile-ready nuclear weapons, U.S. analysts say." *The Washington Post*. August 8, 2017. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/north-korea-now-making-missile-ready-nuclear-weapons-us-analysts-say/2017/08/08/e14b882a-7b6b-11e7-9d08-b79f191668ed_story.html?utm_term=.7ffa46e97fdb

Deterrence

North Korea's nuclear arsenal may embolden it to attempt acts of provocation aimed at "decoupling" the United States from South Korea or other regional allies. North Korea could even launch a conventional attack aimed at unifying the peninsula, holding its nuclear weapons in reserve and threatening to strike the American homeland if U.S. forces becomes involved. And while Pyongyang may attempt limited escalations to probe American resolve, deterring more significant aggression is essential to upholding America's regional interests. Fortunately, history indicates that prudently firm deterrent strategies can effectively prevent such actions.

Some would argue that Kim is "irrational" or otherwise "undeterrable." These arguments often cite Pyongyang's habit of making bombastic threats, or Kim's apparent penchant for executing high-level officials in bizarre and grotesque ways, as evidence that he fundamentally does not value human life.²² But effective deterrence does not require a leader to value their citizens' lives. It requires them to value their *own*, which Kim Jong Un certainly appears to do. And there is no surer way for Kim to bring an end to his own regime, and his own life, than starting a full-scale war with the United States.

Averting War

Finally, and most intuitively, it is clearly in American interests to prevent a costly war on the Korean peninsula. Even before Pyongyang successfully tested an ICBM capable of

²² ABC News. "This Week Transcript, 8/13/17: Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, Anthony Scaramucci." August 13, 2017. <http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/week-transcript-13-17-lt-gen-mcmaster-anthony/story?id=49177024>

hitting the U.S. mainland, Defense Secretary James Mattis suggested that a war with North Korea would be “catastrophic” and entail “the worst kind of fighting in most people’s lifetimes.”²³ Reasonable people might differ regarding the precise level of costs and casualties they find tolerable. But all would agree that the United States should pursue its other objectives while minimizing expected casualties, physical destruction, and economic disruption.

Calibrating Risks and Rewards

The Trump administration’s core dilemma on the Korean peninsula is a familiar one, harking back to debates between the “deterrence” and “spiral” models of international conflict.²⁴ The deterrence model argues that states need to project strength and resolve in order to deter aggressive states from acting on their hostile intentions. The spiral model, conversely, suggests that such projections of strength risk unduly threatening states that have no aggressive intentions, and seek only self-protection. Facing such benign actors, bellicose policies seeking to deter aggression might only succeed in provoking spirals of unnecessary hostility that ultimately lead to a war neither side wants.²⁵

Deterrence, denuclearization, and limitation of North Korea’s nuclear capabilities all will require the United States to project strength and threaten painful consequences if

²³ Face the Nation. “Transcript: Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.” May 28, 2017.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/transcript-defense-secretary-james-mattis-on-face-the-nation-may-28-2017/>

²⁴ Jervis, Robert. *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976).

²⁵ Jervis, Robert. “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma.” *World Politics*. 30, no. 2 (1978) 167-214; Glaser, Charles. “The Security Dilemma Revisited.” *World Politics*. 50, no. 1 (1997) 171-201.

Pyongyang does not accede to American demands. But by their very nature, these threats increase the risk of inadvertent escalation and even full-scale war. Indeed, as Thomas Schelling argued, coercive threats between nuclear powers generate leverage precisely because they entail a heightened risk of mutual disaster.²⁶ This is the core logic of “brinkmanship” as a tactic in coercive diplomacy. The question is whether these threats also increase probability of Pyongyang making some significant policy concession that would enhance American security and offset the risks inherent in this escalatory rhetoric. If not, then the risk simply promises no compensating reward.

But to date, the Trump administration has focused its coercive demands on denuclearization, with comparatively little attention focused on deterrence and even less on limiting the further development of Pyongyang’s nuclear and ICBM capabilities.²⁷ This emphasis is doubly problematic. It aims at an objective that, as argued above, is entirely unattainable through diplomatic means. It is also disproportionately likely to result in war, as Pyongyang *knows* that it will never accede to the Trump administration’s key demand. And knowing that American policymakers will find diplomacy to be futile, Pyongyang’s estimate of the likelihood of war will increase without offering any corresponding policy concessions.

This may be yet another example of Trump’s favored “anchoring” negotiation strategy – making an outlandishly aggressive opening offer in order to shift the perceived range of feasible negotiating outcomes in your favor. Experimental evidence demonstrating this

²⁶ Schelling, Thomas. *Arms and Influence*. (New Haven. Yale University Press: 1966)

²⁷ United States, and Donald Trump. *National Security Strategy of the United States: The White House*. (2017); Mattis, Jim and Rex Tillerson. “We’re Holding Pyongyang to Account.” *The Wall Street Journal*. August 13, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/were-holding-pyongyang-to-account-1502660253>

tactic's effectiveness is impressively robust.²⁸ But the primary drawback of anchoring is that an adversary may interpret the aggressive opening offer as an indication of irreconcilability, and simply walk away from negotiations. Best case, this simply gives North Korea time to further expand its nuclear and ICBM capabilities. Worst case, Pyongyang interprets the Trump administration's unreasonable opening offer as a sign that it has given up on diplomacy and is bent on military action.

Given the risks, if the Trump administration's denuclearization demands are simply an attempt at anchoring, they are an extremely dangerous and misguided form of it. But ultimately, any attempt at coercive diplomacy with North Korea is going to entail some heightened risk of war. Making these risks worthwhile requires the United States to apply the leverage generated by its escalatory tactics toward significant but achievable policy objectives.

A Realistic Negotiating Strategy

The Trump administration needs a clearer and more focused coercive strategy. Escalatory threats can be useful, but they must convey a clear set of realistic demands. The administration should focus its demands on halting North Korean missile and nuclear tests (limitation) and warning against acts of aggression toward American allies in the region (deterrence). These objectives are attainable and promise meaningful security benefits. Furthermore, they can be pursued simultaneously, and there are significant complementarities between them.

²⁸ Beggs, Alan and Kathryn Graddy. "Anchoring Effects: Evidence from Art Auctions." *American Economic Review*. 99, no. 3 (2009) 1027-1039.

The foremost U.S. security objective should be to deter North Korean aggression by reaffirming America's commitment to its regional allies and developing or reinforcing the military capabilities necessary to maintain escalation dominance across all potential stages of a military conflict.²⁹ Irrespective of North Korea's nuclear capabilities, America's regional interests will remain largely intact if North Korea does not attempt any serious acts of aggression, intimidation, or subversion under the cover of its nuclear deterrent. Based on decades of Cold War standoffs across the globe, the U.S. foreign policy community is steeped in experience when it comes to deterring insecure and ideologically hostile regimes. Furthermore, America's regional alliances date back decades, its economic ties to East Asia are enormous, and tens of thousands of American troops remain deployed across the region. The Trump administration is taking up the task of deterring Pyongyang with a massive reserve of credibility already in the bank. And while Trump may have already squandered much of his own credibility, these pre-existing structural factors should make deterring North Korean aggression a perfectly manageable task.

Next, limiting the expansion of North Korea's nuclear and ICBM capabilities may be feasible depending on how much nuclear capability the United States is willing to tolerate. Given the Trump administration's rhetoric, leaders in Pyongyang might reasonably believe they need to significantly increase the size and sophistication of their strategic arsenal to deter an American attack.³⁰ The Kim regime's intense insecurity likely means

²⁹ Kahn, Herman. *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios*. (New York, Routledge: 1965).

³⁰ DeYoung, Karen. "Mattis and Tillerson Move to Clarify Administration Policy on North Korea." *The Washington Post*. August 17, 2017. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/mattis-and->

that it would require enormous concessions and guarantees in order to limit its nuclear arsenal around its current levels. This is theoretically and technically possible, though the political obstacles would be significant. And importantly, time is not on America's side if it wishes to limit Pyongyang's capabilities. Negotiations would need to begin quickly, given the pace of North Korea's nuclear development under Kim Jong Un.

Generating Risk, Using it Rationally

The Trump administration's strategy has significantly increased the risk of conflict on the Korean peninsula. In itself, this is not necessarily ill-advised. The question is whether this risk is being carefully calibrated, and whether the potential leverage derived from it is being utilized effectively in order to extract meaningful concessions.

In this regard, the Trump administration's strategy has been a mess. Vague, bellicose threats are often made via Twitter, with little consultation among allies and advisers. More importantly, the ostensible objectives of these threats are often either unrealistic or trivial. No coercive threat will ever persuade Kim Jong Un to give up his nuclear arsenal. And deterrence aimed at preventing North Korea from "threatening" the United States simply does nothing to further core American security interests. The Trump administration is thus ratcheting up the risk of war on the Korean peninsula without a corresponding diplomatic strategy that promises meaningful concessions as a result.

tillerson-move-to-clarify-administration-policy-on-north-korea/2017/08/17/f363d888-836c-11e7-b359-15a3617c767b_story.html?utm_term=.1da7c454c468

The White House should promptly initiate talks aimed at halting, and potentially rolling back, the development of North Korea's nuclear and ICBM programs, beginning with a moratorium on testing these capabilities. It should also redouble the U.S. commitment to deterring North Korean aggression. Judging by Pyongyang's historical penchant for escalatory behavior and its desire to break up the U.S.-South Korea alliance, there is good reason to believe the North Koreans will attempt limited probes and isolated acts of aggression in an attempt to assess American and South Korean resolve in this altered strategic setting. Early crises will establish precedents and expectations that may have implications for decades. Reinforcing clear red lines and establishing tolerable bounds for North Korean provocations early on will be enormously important.

Trump's belligerent rhetoric has raised the risk of war-by-miscalculation to the point that it may yield significant diplomatic leverage with Pyongyang going forward. Policymakers must apply this leverage in ways that maximize the security payoff while minimizing the risk of actual war. This requires emphasizing deterrence and limitation, not denuclearization.

Risks are inevitable in the Korean crisis. Using them effectively to gain the greatest security payoff possible is the Trump administration's big test – one that it failed during its first year.

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5. North Korea Requires Deterrence and Containment, Not Bombing

Kelly Magsamen

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North Korea poses a serious threat to the United States and our allies. North Korea is the country violating multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions. And Kim Jong Un is a ruthless tyrant building nuclear weapons on the backs of his oppressed people.

I worked the North Korea challenge every day in my years at the Department of Defense, so I am deeply familiar with the adage that North Korea is the land of lousy options. There are no easy solutions or silver bullets. But I do believe there are some basic ingredients to a sound strategy:

- Clear and consistent strategic messaging;
- Sustained high levels of international pressure;
- Diplomatic persistence, clarity and creativity;
- Strong alliance management;
- Credible deterrence with responsible risk management; and,
- Healthy skepticism about the intentions of China.

To its credit, the Trump administration has had some important achievements on increasing pressure on North Korea, including strong United Nations Security Council sanctions resolutions and pushing China further along. In some ways, these are extensions of the Obama administration's strategy and I believe more can be done to increase pressure. However, the Trump administration's strategy has also been plagued by incoherence and neglect on many of these other fronts — and as a result, the sum has not been greater than its parts.

With tensions high and increasing talk of preventive U.S. military action, I am deeply concerned about the prospect of war with North Korea — whether by miscalculation or by design. The question we should be asking ourselves is whether initiating armed conflict with North Korea is necessary or advisable to advancing long-term U.S. national security interests. I believe that after a thorough analysis of the likely costs of preventive war, and a careful examination of the alternatives, it is nearly impossible to conclude that the preventive use of force is advisable or even the least bad option in terms of advancing our interests and minimizing risk.

There is a role for the military instrument to play — it is essential for deterrence credibility, the defense of our allies, and to back up diplomacy. But use of force should always be of last resort. If there is an imminent threat to U.S. forces in Korea or Japan or elsewhere in the region, or against the U.S. homeland, our right to self-defense is clear and absolute. However, there are sound reasons why multiple administrations have refrained from using force preventively — it would likely be catastrophic in human, economic, and strategic terms, not to mention illegal.

The Human Costs

Estimating the human costs of war is always an imperfect exercise. Much depends on assumptions and scenarios. However, even a limited military strike would likely escalate quickly into a regional conflagration. South Korea would likely face an artillery barrage on Seoul, if not a nuclear or chemical attack from the North. According to the [Congressional Research Service](#), between 30,000 and 300,000 people could die within days of the conflict.³¹ In addition to 28,500 U.S. military personnel and thousands of their dependents, there are approximately 100,000-500,000 American citizens living in South Korea. North Korea's ballistic missiles can also range Tokyo, the world's largest city, putting millions at risk. Hawaii and Guam — where millions of American citizens reside — are at the top of the North Korean target list.

Inside North Korea, a major humanitarian crisis would likely unfold in the aftermath of the use of force. Food supplies and basic health care would be scarce, exacerbated by massive refugee flows numbering in the millions. Hundreds of thousands of political prisoners and detainees would also need critical attention.

Post-conflict security demands would be similarly daunting. North Korea has the fourth largest military in the world: over a million strong with more than seven million reservists. Including troops and reservists, that is nearly 25 times the size of the Iraqi army in 2003.³² Even as foreign forces worked to seize nuclear sites and materials, stocks

³¹ Kathleen J. McInnis et al, *The North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Military Options and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC; Congressional Research Service, November 6, 2017).

³² Sharon Otterman, "Iraq: Iraq's Pre-War Military Capabilities," *CFR Backgrounder* (February 3, 2005), <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/iraq-iraqs-prewar-military-capabilities>.

of chemical weapons would be scattered around the country, along with caches of conventional weapons in underground tunnels and facilities. Surviving factions could ignite civil war and insurgency. As a result, according to some estimates, stabilization and peacekeeping tasks could require more than 400,000 troops.³³

This does not even begin to address the complex governance issues that would instantly emerge. We have encountered questions on unification, demobilization, and transitional justice in prior conflicts — a few of the many lessons from our experiences in Iraq — and have not acquitted ourselves well in dealing with them.

The Economic Costs

On the potential economic costs of war, let us start with a few simple facts:

- The Republic of Korea (ROK) is the 12th largest economy in the world and is deeply integrated into global supply chains.
- Japan is the 3rd largest economy in the world by nominal GDP, and deeply integrated into global supply chains.
- The ROK and Japan account for approximately 7% (or \$1.14 trillion) of global merchandise exports and 6% (or \$1.01 trillion) of global merchandise imports. Japan is the world's 4th largest exporter and 5th largest importer of merchandise; South Korea is the world's 8th largest exporter and 10th largest importer of merchandise.

³³ Jennifer Lind, "The Perils of Korean Unification," *The Diplomat* (February 23, 2015),

<https://thediplomat.com/2015/02/the-perils-of-korean-unification/>.

If nuclear conflict were to occur, the RAND Corporation estimates that such an attack would cost at least 10 percent of the ROK's GDP in the first year alone and that those losses would likely be extended for at least ten years. And these estimates do not even include a strike on Hawaii or Japan.³⁴

Further, direct costs to U.S. taxpayers of a war with North Korea would be significant. According to another 2010 RAND report, estimates for long-term reconstruction of the Korean Peninsula top \$1 trillion.³⁵

The Strategic Costs

The strategic costs of preventive war with North Korea would be quite consequential for long-term U.S. interests, even assuming military success. Three questions factor most in my mind:

- 1. What will be the long-term impact on our alliances?** If a military strike is conducted without the concurrence of the ROK and Japan, you can expect an end to the alliance relationships as we know them in Asia and probably around the world. A preventive war without the full support of our Asian allies would likely do lasting damage to trust in America — not just in Asia, but globally. Without our

³⁴ Kathleen J. McInniss et al, *The North Korean Nuclear Challenge: Military Options and Issues for Congress* (Washington, DC; Congressional Research Service, November 6, 2017).

³⁵ Bruce W. Bennett, *Uncertainties in the North Korean Nuclear Threat* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010).

alliances and partnerships, the United States' role as a Pacific power would be fundamentally diminished for the long term.

2. What will China and Russia do? China will almost certainly intervene into a destabilized North Korea, creating both military and political obstacles for the United States. It is likely that China will seek to occupy North Korea, at a minimum to prevent a complete state collapse and to secure nuclear sites. A long-term Chinese presence in North Korea — and it would almost certainly be long-term — has implications for our alliance with the ROK and our interests in Northeast Asia. And in a worse-case scenario, absent substantial strategic and tactical deconfliction in advance, a potential U.S.-China conflict could easily materialize. Russia, which shares a small land border with North Korea, will most certainly oppose U.S. intervention and continue to play spoiler alongside China.

3. What would be the opportunity costs for the United States? This question never gets enough attention. War with North Korea would become the central preoccupation of the president and his national security team for the duration of his term — crowding out all other issues and limiting strategic bandwidth for the United States to deal with challenges like Russia, China, and Iran. If great power competition with China and Russia are indeed central to U.S. national security strategy, then war with North Korea would almost certainly distract U.S. resources and focus and increase China's opportunities in the region. From a basic force management perspective, hard trade-offs would need to be made with respect to forces and capabilities in other theaters.

Examining the Argument for Preventive Use of Force

There are some who argue that preventive use of force is the least bad option. They predicate this view in part on an assumption that Kim Jong Un is not a rational actor and therefore deterrence is not a reliable option for preventing a nuclear first strike against the United States. They also suggest that once North Korea achieves a full intercontinental ballistic missile capability, Kim Jong Un will use that capability to hold the U.S. homeland at risk while forcibly unifying the Korean Peninsula. While no one can credibly predict North Korean intentions, and while the possibility of nuclear coercion is real, there are some empirical weaknesses in this line of argument. Let me break it down.

First, history shows otherwise. While reunification remains the stated objective of both North and South Korea, the credible threat of American and ROK firepower has prevented North Korea from pursuing that reunification by force since 1953. More than 28,000 U.S. troops remain on the Peninsula today, backed up by our extended deterrence commitment that would bring to bear the full spectrum of American power.

Strengthening our deterrence credibility starts not with an overt demonstration of U.S. power in defense of our own citizens and interests, but with the credibility of our commitment to defend the citizens and interests of our allies. A preventive attack would undermine America's deterrence strategy by showing that we are willing to sacrifice our allies, essentially decoupling them ourselves.

Second, there are the basic military realities. Some have suggested that "war over there is better than war over here." But let us be honest: North Korea already has the capability to hold U.S. interests at risk in the Pacific — with nuclear-tipped missiles that can reach Hawaii and Guam where millions of American citizens live, not to mention the hundreds

of thousands of American civilians living in both Korea and Japan. So, war over there would also potentially cost millions of American lives.

Third, the arguments for preventive use of force are predicated on ultimately unknowable determinations on Kim Jong Un's rationality. What would be the objective and how would we effectuate the desired outcome, especially if he is irrational? Much will depend on Kim Jong Un's perceptions of our intentions. So if we assume Kim Jong Un is indeed an irrational actor, why would we think that he would exercise restraint when presented with a limited U.S. military strike? This is the central flaw in the argument for the "bloody nose" approach. Escalation is extremely likely and deterrence cuts both ways.

Finally, there are real questions about the effectiveness of preventive use of force. What would a limited strike ultimately seek to achieve? If it is to show we are serious and to force Kim Jong Un to the negotiating table, it is unlikely that he will oblige. If the objective of a strike is to take out his nuclear and ballistic missile programs, then that is not a limited military option. In my judgment, that would be a full-scale war, and in that case, we would need to have high confidence that we were able to hit all out targets and that the nuclear, chemical, and ballistic programs could not be reconstituted. In fact, in a letter to Congress last year, the Pentagon itself estimates that eliminating all of North Korea's nuclear capabilities would require an actual ground invasion.³⁶

³⁶ Dan Lamothe and Carol Morello, "Securing North Korean Nuclear Sites Would Require a Ground Invasion, Pentagon Says," *Washington Post* (November 4, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/securing-north-korean-nuclear-sites-would-require-a-ground-invasion-pentagon-says/2017/11/04/32d5f6-cocf-11e7-97d9-bdab5-oab381_story.html?utm_term=.8a54d9233d25.

What Are the Other Options?

National security decision-making often forces us to choose the least bad option. Make no mistake that with North Korea there are no good options and that all of them carry risk. But by far the worst is war. In my view, the least bad option is to contain, deter, pressure, and vigorously try to open a genuine diplomatic process. So where does that leave us?

To begin with, we need to refresh our approach to diplomacy and make clear to North Korea that the door is open. We all know that diplomacy with North Korea has a checkered past, but it must be the leading line of the U.S. effort if for no other reason than that diplomacy is the necessary predicate to all other options. And while North Korea has demonstrated little interest in meaningful diplomacy over denuclearization, we need to be clear, persistent, and creative about how we approach any negotiations. There has been significant confusion over U.S. intentions in this regard. We also need to consider that at the heart of the North Korea crisis is a security dilemma, not just an arms control and proliferation problem. We need to think creatively about how to address that dilemma in concert with our allies — including what assurances we would be prepared to offer in exchange for meaningful and verifiable limits on their nuclear program. Diplomacy is only likely to be successful if it begins without preconditions and moves in stages of confidence-building. We should also be positioning ourselves to shape any negotiations to our advantage and not allow the North Koreans to seize the initiative. For this to be possible, I would encourage the Trump administration to appoint an experienced high-level envoy that has the unambiguous backing of the White House to coordinate diplomacy and messaging with our allies and who would be dedicated full time to the pursuit of negotiations.

Second, we should consider a shift in our strategy vis-à-vis China. While the Chinese do not share our long-term interests on the Korean Peninsula, they do worry about two things: secondary sanctions and American encirclement. On the sanction front, the administration has only just begun to get serious with China, and the United States should pull every non-military pressure lever it has over North Korea before putting American lives on the line. Critically, China can cut off North Korea's oil supplies, but it has not yet done so. The Trump administration should substantially ratchet up the costs to Beijing if it continues to supply fuel not only to the North Korean economy but to its military as well.

Further, the Chinese need to look out around the region and see the negative effect that a nuclear-armed North Korea will have on their long-term objective to impose a sphere of influence in their near periphery. We should consider what additional force posture is necessary to contain and deter a nuclear-armed North Korea and we should not hesitate to move forward with it, whether that takes the form of an additional THAAD battery on the Peninsula, support for Japanese acquisition of key capabilities, or additional U.S. air, naval, and ground forces around the region. As the United States bolsters deterrence and containment against North Korea, U.S. policy must send the unmistakable signal to China that, if the threat from North Korea remains, the United States will strengthen its military posture in Northeast Asia. We also need to work harder to improve Japan-ROK relations and further operationalize trilateral cooperation — not just to prevent North Korea from driving wedges, but China as well.

Third, we are likely to find ourselves in a containment and deterrence scenario and we should begin conceptualizing what would be necessary, in that scenario, to limit risk. This

is obviously no one's preferred outcome and it has potential downsides. But given the challenges of diplomacy with North Korea and given the overwhelming risks of war, I think we also need to be realistic. What would an active containment and upgraded deterrence strategy look like that would minimize risk, protect our long-term strategic interests, and could be executed in concert with our allies? We need to be thinking hard about how to upgrade our extended deterrence commitments to our allies, how to improve conventional deterrence, and how to craft a much more integrated and enhanced counter-proliferation framework.

A war of choice with North Korea would be the option of highest risk. It would be unlikely to advance U.S. long-term strategic interests, and in my view, could potentially mortally wound them. Given the stakes involved with the use of force, the Trump administration owes our military and the American public the planning and preparation that, frankly, was absent with Iraq in 2003.

**Portions of this article previously appeared in The Hill on December 1, 2017, with Ely Ratner.³⁷*

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³⁷ Kelly Magsamen and Ely Ratner, "An American attack on North Korea will come with epic consequences," *The Hill*, December 1, 2017, <https://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/362736-an-american-attack-on-north-korea-will-come-with-epic-consequences/>

6. The Least Bad Option: Damage Limitation and U.S. Deterrence Strategy toward North Korea

Vince A. Manzo and John K. Warden

The Trump administration is right to be alarmed by the breakneck advancement of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. But by treating North Korea's push toward an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) as a crisis rather than a component of a long-term challenge, the Trump team is stumbling toward an unnecessary war. Senior officials appear to be coalescing around the wrongheaded conclusion that the United States cannot deter a nuclear-armed North Korea and are reportedly contemplating limited military action that would carry significant risk of escalation to a catastrophic war.³⁸

Fortunately, the United States has acceptable options between the insupportable extremes of preventive war or capitulation to Pyongyang's most far-reaching demands. Rather than trying to "solve the problem," the Trump administration needs a long-term strategy for managing the threat. The administration's goals should be to deter war, mitigate the risk of nuclear escalation, and assuage South Korean and Japanese concerns. To achieve these goals, the United States must demonstrate that it will oppose armed aggression in the face of increasing nuclear risk. Maintaining robust "damage-limitation capabilities" that can significantly limit North Korea's ability to conduct successful

³⁸ Zachary Fryer-Biggs, "Time Running Out to Avoid War with North Korea, U.S. Official Says," *Newsweek*, December 12, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/time-running-out-avoid-war-north-korea-us-official-says-745914>; Ben Riley-Smith, "US making plans for a 'bloody nose' military attack on North Korea," *The Telegraph*, December 20, 2017, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/12/20/exclusive-us-making-plans-bloody-nose-military-attack-north/>.

nuclear strikes against the United States and its allies should be the Trump administration's long-term priority.

The Extended Deterrence and Assurance Challenge

The risk associated with North Korea's advancing nuclear weapons program is not that Pyongyang will conduct a bolt-from-the-blue strike against the United States. Rather, the concern is that North Korea will launch conventional attacks against Japan and South Korea backed by nuclear threats. To continue to uphold its extended deterrence commitments, the United States must be willing to step into the crosshairs of an increasing number of North Korean ICBMs on behalf of an ally. This is an extraordinary commitment, and one that Pyongyang, and possibly Seoul and Tokyo, may come to question.

As North Korea's nuclear capabilities improve, Pyongyang is likely to become more ambitious. Pyongyang likely has – or will develop – a strategy for using its nuclear weapons capability to reshape the political arrangement on the peninsula.³⁹ If Pyongyang is confident that it can threaten nuclear escalation to deter the United States and South Korea from pursuing regime change, then it is likely to be more willing to initiate provocations, escalate crises, and risk war.⁴⁰ In the worst case scenario, North Korea may

³⁹ B.R. Myers, "North Korea's Unification Drive," Royal Asiatic Society-Korea Branch, December 19, 2017, Somerset Palace, Seoul, South Korea. Lecture. Available at: <http://sthelepress.com/index.php/2017/12/21/north-koreas-unification-drive/>.

⁴⁰ Scott M. Bray, "Speech at the Institute for Corean-American Studies: North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Capabilities," June 26, 2017, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/20170726-NIM-East-Asia-Speech-to-ICAS-on-North-Koreas-Nuclear-and-Ballistic-Missile-Programs.pdf>.

come to think that it can invade and conquer South Korea while using nuclear threats to deter U.S. intervention.⁴¹ Short of that, the Kim regime has intermediate objectives: weakening the U.S.-South Korea alliance, reducing U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula, dividing South Korea and Japan, and extracting economic concessions.⁴²

A related concern is that Seoul and Tokyo may come to doubt U.S. security guarantees. They may fear that the United States would fail to honor its security commitment and conclude that they need their own nuclear weapons to deter North Korea. Perhaps more likely, Seoul might conclude that it needs to take matters into its own hands in a crisis by conducting a unilateral, conventional strike targeting Kim Jong Un or key leadership around him. Alternatively, Seoul might agree to a North-South confederation or a substantially reduced U.S. military presence; Tokyo might deny the use of its territory for U.S. military operations on the Korean peninsula.

The United States, therefore, must convince Pyongyang, Seoul, and Tokyo that it will oppose North Korean aggression. The United States can deter North Korea from starting a war or using nuclear weapons.⁴³ But doing so will require a determined effort to shape Pyongyang's calculus. The U.S. and allied goal should be to convince the Kim regime that its nuclear weapons are an insurance policy against an unprovoked invasion rather than a license for conquest.

⁴¹ Victor Cha, "North Korea's Weapons of Mass Destruction: Badges, Shields, or Swords?" *Political Science Quarterly* 117, Iss. 2 (2002), p. 224, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.2307/798181/full>.

⁴² Max Fisher, "North Korea's Nuclear Arms Sustain Drive for 'Final Victory,'" *The New York Times*, July 29, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/29/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-missile.html?_r=0.

⁴³ Ken E. Gause, *North Korea's Provocation and Escalation Calculus: Dealing with the Kim Jong-un Regime* (Arlington VA: CNA August 2015), https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/COP-2015-U-011060.pdf.

The Case for Damage Limitation

A central element of U.S. long-term strategy for deterring a nuclear-armed North Korea and assuring South Korea and Japan should be to maintain robust “damage-limitation capabilities” to keep pace with North Korea’s advancing nuclear forces. By damage-limitation capabilities, we mean military capabilities that would allow the United States – in a conflict – to use offensive and defensive means to significantly reduce North Korea’s ability to conduct successful nuclear strikes against it and its allies. Broadly, these capabilities would include three key elements: intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities to locate and track North Korean nuclear forces, strike capabilities to disable nuclear-armed delivery vehicles or disrupt their command and control, and defenses to intercept nuclear-armed missiles once North Korea has launched them.

Of course, the United States has significant ISR, strike, and missile defense capabilities today. But as North Korea’s nuclear weapons force becomes larger and more sophisticated, the United States will need to keep pace, which will require examining North Korean nuclear forces as a network and ensuring that the United States has the appropriate tools to exploit weak points. One key shortcoming of the current U.S. posture is an overreliance on nuclear weapons to conduct strikes against North Korea’s nuclear forces.⁴⁴ Massive nuclear strikes may not be credible in Pyongyang’s eyes, making it critical that the United States improve its conventional options, particularly against high-

⁴⁴ David Barno and Nora Bensahel, “The Growing Danger of a U.S. Nuclear First Strike on North Korea,” *War on the Rocks*, October 10, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/10/the-growing-danger-of-a-u-s-nuclear-first-strike-on-north-korea/>.

value targets like ICBMs. This might involve the deployment of additional strike platforms to the Korean peninsula or the fielding of intercontinental-range conventional strike capabilities.⁴⁵

Robust damage-limitation capabilities will help the United States disabuse Kim Jong Un of the idea that he can use or threaten to use nuclear weapons to terminate a conventional conflict. Pyongyang knows it cannot match the full military potential of the United States. As a result, Kim has incentives to use nuclear weapons against U.S. forces and bases in the region, while relying on the threat of significant nuclear attacks against U.S. and allied cities to convince the United States to stop fighting.⁴⁶

But if Kim and his advisers fear that the United States will execute strikes to destroy their nuclear forces – either to preempt its nuclear use during a conventional conflict or to retaliate against a limited nuclear strike – then they will have dramatically less confidence in their ability to coerce or intimidate through the threat or use of force. Recognizing this military disadvantage, Pyongyang will be less likely to go on the offensive, in peacetime or in crisis, or to attempt to end a conflict by conducting limited nuclear strikes.

⁴⁵ John R. Harvey, “Negating North Korea’s Nukes,” *Defense News*, February 15, 2016,

<https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2016/02/15/commentary-negating-north-koreas-nukes/>;

M. Elaine Bunn and Vincent A. Manzo, *Conventional Prompt Global Strike: Strategic Asset or Unusable Liability?* (Washington DC: National Defense University Press, February 2011),

<http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/stratforum/SF-263.pdf>.

⁴⁶ John K. Warden, “North Korea’s Nuclear Posture: An Evolving Challenge for U.S. Deterrence,”

Proliferation Papers, Ifri, March 2017,

https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/warden_north_korea_nuclear_posture_2017.pdf; Brad

Roberts, *The Case for U.S. Nuclear Weapons in the 21st Century* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 62-80.

Washington, on the other hand, would have greater confidence in its ability to deter – and if necessary mitigate – nuclear escalation, which should increase U.S. willingness to stand with allies in the face of aggression. For allies, U.S. damage-limitation capabilities would help to assure them of the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence despite advancing North Korean nuclear capabilities.⁴⁷

Lastly, damage-limitation capabilities provide Washington with an option to reduce harm to the United States and its allies. A conflict on the Korean peninsula could spiral out of control despite U.S. efforts to de-escalate. Imagine North Korea launching several nuclear strikes and preparing more, regardless of the consequences. In this scenario, the United States and its allies may determine that deterring the next wave of nuclear attacks is not viable and instead seek to disarm North Korea's nuclear forces. The right mix of offensive and defensive capabilities would save thousands if not millions of American, Korean, and Japanese lives.

There are, of course, risks associated with the pursuit of damage-limitation capabilities against a nuclear-armed adversary. The disadvantages have persuaded the U.S. government to accept a relationship of mutual vulnerability with Russia, and some scholars argue that pursuit of improved damage-limitation capabilities against China would be counterproductive.⁴⁸ For North Korea, however, the likely benefits outweigh the risks.

⁴⁷ Sugio Takahashi, "Thinking about the Unthinkable: The Case of the Korean Peninsula," in *North Korea and Asia's Evolving Nuclear Landscape*, NBR Special Report #67 (Washington DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, August 2017), <http://nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=954>.

⁴⁸ Department of Defense, *Report on the Nuclear Employment Strategy of the United States* (Arlington, VA: Department of Defense, June 12, 2013), p. 3.

Objection One: Not Required to Deter

One objection is that the United States does not need damage-limitation capabilities to deter North Korea. This argument posits that a reliable forward military presence combined with the threat of an “effective and overwhelming” response to North Korean nuclear use is both necessary and sufficient to deny North Korea the ability to conquer territory and deter it from conducting nuclear strikes.

This argument is half-right. The United States should pursue an improved conventional posture on the Korean peninsula *and* robust damage-limitation capabilities. But one is not a substitute for the other. A forward military posture would cause Pyongyang to think twice before undertaking conventional military aggression, but would not eliminate the possibility of war.

Moreover, threats of an overwhelming response may not be sufficient to deter North Korean nuclear use absent significant damage-limitation capabilities. In an escalating conventional conflict, the Kim regime might be tempted to try to coerce Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo to accommodate its demands through limited nuclear strikes. If Pyongyang believes that it can reliably threaten several major U.S. cities, it may doubt that Washington will follow through on its threat of overwhelming retaliation, instead expecting accommodation. With robust damage-limitation capabilities, the United States can credibly threaten to preempt North Korea’s nuclear missiles and intercept most of

https://www.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/ReporttoCongressonUSNuclearEmploymentStrategy_Section491.pdf. Charles L. Glaser and Steven Fetter, “Should the United States Reject MAD: Damage Limitation and U.S. Nuclear Strategy Toward China,” *International Security* 41, Iss. 1 (Summer 2016), https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/ISEC_a_00248.

Policy Roundtable: Are There any Good Choices When it Comes to North Korea?
<https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-good-choices-comes-north-korea/>

those that survive, thus reducing the vulnerability of the United States. As a result, North Korea would be less confident that it can coerce capitulation.

Objection Two: Triggers an Unwinnable Arms Race

A second objection is that pursuit of damage-limitation capabilities would trigger an unwinnable arms race. This objection involves two claims. First, an arms race with North Korea would leave the United States and its allies worse off because striking North Korean nuclear forces is too difficult and U.S. missile defenses are too limited, particularly compared to the lower cost of fielding additional missiles. Second, U.S. damage-limitation capabilities would only be meaningful if the United States were supremely confident that a comprehensive strike against North Korean nuclear forces would be at or near one-hundred percent effective.

Improving U.S. long-range strike and missile-defense capabilities would, indeed, incentivize Pyongyang to quantitatively and qualitatively improve its nuclear forces. But with North Korea – unlike Russia and China – this is not a competition the United States should avoid. Pyongyang is already trying to increase the survivability, reliability, and yield of its nuclear forces and is not going to reverse course. But the United States and its allies have a massive advantage over North Korea in financial and technical resources that they can use to make it harder for the North to maintain a survivable reserve of nuclear forces in war.

North Korea is following the path of previous nuclear powers to keep its nuclear forces survivable: It is hiding key capabilities in dispersed, hardened facilities that are difficult to strike and is taking advantage of ground-based, mobile launchers that are difficult to find.

In time, North Korea is likely to deploy nuclear-armed ballistic missiles on submarines that are also difficult to locate.

Holding these forces at risk is hard but not impossible. Against a far superior competitor in the Soviet Union, the United States was able to use intelligence capabilities to track and target mobile missiles and submarines.⁴⁹ Today, improvements in technology are making it easier to find and strike mobile and hardened targets even against sophisticated, determined competitors.⁵⁰ North Korea is a far smaller country than either Russia or China, with far less transportation infrastructure, less experience operating mobile missiles and submarines, and a significantly reduced ability to deny the United States overhead and airborne ISR. If the United States and its allies dedicate significant resources to the effort, they can substantially improve their ability to find, track, target, and strike North Korea's mobile missiles and submarines.

Regarding missile defense, critics are correct to note that deploying additional missiles and countermeasures is cheaper than fielding reliable defenses and to warn of the limitations of current U.S. missile defense systems. But if Washington prioritizes realistic improvements in its homeland defense system, it can mitigate North Korea's ability to

⁴⁹ Austin Long and Brendan Ritterhouse Green, "Stalking the Secure Second Strike: Intelligence, Counterforce, and Nuclear Strategy," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, Iss. 1-2 (2015), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01402390.2014.958150>.

⁵⁰ Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Counterforce: Technological Change and the Future of Nuclear Deterrence," *International Security* 41, Iss. 4 (Spring 2017), https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/abs/10.1162/ISEC_a_00273; Brendan Ritterhouse Green, Austin Long, Matthew Kroenig, Charles L. Glaser, and Steve Fetter, "The Limits of Damage Limitation," *International Security* 42, Iss. 1 (Summer 2017), https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/full/10.1162/ISEC_c_00279.

reliably threaten the continental United States.⁵¹ In addition, the United States, South Korea, and Japan can improve their combined regional missile defense posture by investing in proven systems and exploring new capabilities.

To be clear, the United States will never be one-hundred-percent confident that it can comprehensively disarm North Korea's nuclear forces. Fortunately, the purpose of pursuing additional damage-limitation capabilities is not to justify preventive war but rather to reduce the level of nuclear risk that the United States and its allies must take on in an escalating conflict with North Korea. There is an immense difference between an adversary that *might* be able to destroy a handful of U.S. cities and an adversary that could *reliably* threaten scores. Absolute security from North Korea's nuclear weapons is unobtainable, but reducing U.S. and allied vulnerability is a realistic goal.

Objection Three: Incentivizes North Korean Nuclear Use

A third objection is that a damage-limitation posture would increase the likelihood of North Korea using a nuclear weapon in a conflict. It posits that if Kim Jong Un fears that the United States will destroy his nuclear forces, then he might feel pressure to use his nuclear weapons before he loses them.

This conflates North Korea's fear of regime change with its fear of strikes against its nuclear forces and, as a result, gets the relationship between U.S. damage-limitation

⁵¹ Thomas Karako, Ian Williams, and Wes Rumbaugh, *Missile Defense 2020: Next Steps for Defending the Homeland* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies April 2017), pp. 52-122, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/170406_Karako_MissileDefense2020_Web.pdf?rgfZJOoY5AJY5ScsfZQW8z7Bn7dtSlrr.

capabilities and North Korea's incentive to use nuclear weapons backward. Kim's primary goal in a conflict with the United States would be regime survival. North Korea, therefore, requires a war strategy that coerces the United States and its allies to limit their ambitions, not because they are *incapable* of pursuing regime change in North Korea, but because they *calculate* that the risk is not worth the benefit.

If the Kim regime fears that South Korea and the United States are going full bore toward regime change, nuclear escalation is a logical strategy. By raising the specter of an escalating nuclear war, Pyongyang would force Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo to reconsider whether the benefits of dislodging the regime are worth the likely catastrophic costs. But Pyongyang would also understand that nuclear escalation is an *extremely risky* strategy. In crossing the nuclear threshold, North Korea would contravene a long-held international norm against the use of nuclear weapons and cross a U.S. red line, ensuring that Washington has *a stronger interest* in pursuing regime change than at the outset of the conflict.

Robust U.S. ISR, strike, and missile defense capabilities would make coercive nuclear escalation *significantly riskier* for Pyongyang. This damage-limitation posture would undermine Kim's confidence that, by escalating a conflict to the nuclear level, he can convince the United States to stand down out of fear. As a result, in both crisis and conflict, a Kim regime interested in survival would have a reason to find less risky ways out of crisis.

On the other hand, U.S. damage-limitation capabilities would increase Pyongyang's concerns about America's pursuit of regime change. Therefore, the requisite mix of offensive and defensive capabilities must be supplemented by a deliberate effort to assure

the Kim regime that it has an off-ramp during conflict. Effective deterrence hinges on the promise of reciprocal restraint. As long as their wartime objectives remain limited, the United States and its allies must clearly signal to the Kim regime – in word and deed – that they are not interested in pursuing regime change *unless* North Korea conducts nuclear attacks first.⁵² Engaging in peacetime diplomacy with North Korea to guard against misperception and miscalculation and reduce the likelihood of localized, escalation-prone conflicts would also help establish an understanding of reciprocal restraint based on clear deterrence thresholds.

The Land of Bad Options

Every approach to countering a nuclear-armed North Korea entails risk. But in the land of bad options, deterrence reigns. A U.S.-led deterrence strategy is our best hope for preventing North Korea from achieving its revisionist objectives at an acceptable cost to the United States and its allies. But it will only be effective if we prioritize maintaining robust damage-limitation capabilities to keep pace with North Korea’s advancing nuclear forces.

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⁵² Vincent A. Manzo, “After the First Shots: Managing Escalation in Northeast Asia,” *Joint Forces Quarterly* 77 (April 2015), <http://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/Article/581877/after-the-first-shots-managing-escalation-in-northeast-asia/>.

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7. Managing a Nuclear-Armed North Korea: Deter, Contain, Constrain, Transform

Adam Mount

U.S. policy on North Korea has failed. For more than 25 years, the United States and its allies have worked to prevent North Korea from achieving a deliverable nuclear capability. Over the first year of the Trump administration, rapid advancements in missile technology have brought North Korea to this threshold. The program is too advanced, too dispersed, and too valuable to the regime for us to quickly eliminate it through diplomatic or military means on acceptable terms. As a result, the United States and its allies are now forced to manage a nuclear-armed North Korea that deters aggression and other destabilizing behavior, contains illicit activity from spreading beyond its borders, and encourages the transformation of the regime over time. Each month that passes that has the United States clinging to an outdated, invalid policy is one that runs a severe risk of war and allows North Korean activities to go unaddressed. The regrettable fact is that a nuclear-armed North Korea exists and is not being managed.

U.S. policy

During its first year in office, the Trump administration has finally prioritized North Korea on the U.S. agenda. Yet, an inflated assessment of U.S. leverage, coupled with a poor policy process, has prevented additional resources and attention from transforming the standoff.

The Trump team has manufactured a military and economic crisis they hope could force North Korea to capitulate. In its formal public statements and in a series of highly inflammatory statements on twitter, the administration has claimed that Pyongyang cannot be deterred, and that the United States will not tolerate vulnerability to North Korean missiles. In so doing, the administration is attempting to convince North Korea that failure to denuclearize will lead to war. If this effort were coordinated effectively and launched a decade ago, it may have stood a decent chance of success. However, both the execution of the policy and the state of North Korea's capabilities are proving to be fatal complications.

In their more lucid moments, administration officials claim that, once heightened economic sanctions have an opportunity to take hold, they intend to convene denuclearization negotiations. Yet, these moments of clarity are almost immediately obscured by contradictions, reversals, and vague threats of war that lack credibility or clear terms.⁵³ There remains a very real and entirely unacceptable possibility that influential groups in the administration prefer war or could talk themselves into one.⁵⁴ The mixed messages allow Pyongyang to temporize and select the interpretation of U.S. policy they consider most advantageous. Washington has not forced Pyongyang to

⁵³ Laura Rosenberger, "How President Trump could tweet his way into nuclear war with North Korea," *Washington Post*, July 5, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/07/05/how-president-trump-could-tweet-his-way-into-nuclear-war-with-north-korea/>; Kori Schake, "What Total Destruction of North Korea Means," *The Atlantic*, September 19, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/09/north-korea-trump-united-nations-kim-jong-un-nuclear-missile/540345/>.

⁵⁴ Kori Schake, "The North Korea Debate Sounds Eerily Familiar," *The Atlantic*, December 8, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/north-korea-iraq-war-george-w-bush-trump/547796/>.

respond to a credible negotiations proposal that stands a realistic chance of halting North Korea's rapid development of a nuclear arsenal that the Kim regime sees as critical to domestic legitimacy and international survival.⁵⁵ North Korea will continue to develop, test, and operationally deploy these systems in the coming months and years.⁵⁶

Instead of forcing North Korea to capitulate to U.S. demands, the Trump administration's belligerent posturing has deliberately eroded stability on the peninsula, significantly raising the risk of an accidental or deliberate conflict. At the same time, the exclusive and hopeless fixation on immediate denuclearization has prevented the United States and its allies from confronting the evolving North Korean threat. Despite a great deal of rhetoric, the Trump administration has done very little to actually address North Korea's development of intermediate and intercontinental missiles and its demonstration of a more destructive nuclear device. Despite the regime's dramatic nuclear and missile advancements over Trump's first year in office, and despite ongoing improvements in its submarine, special operations, cyber, and artillery capabilities, U.S. force posture has not adapted.

North Korea's technical developments are invalidating the basic assumptions of U.S. policy toward the regime. Strategies predicated on coercing Pyongyang into negotiations to eliminate its nuclear arsenal now appear untenable, at least for the medium term. On

⁵⁵ Hans M. Kristensen & Robert S. Norris, "North Korean nuclear capabilities, 2018," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 74(1), 2018, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00963402.2017.1413062>.

⁵⁶ Jon Wolfsthal, "Give Up on Denuclearizing North Korea," *The Atlantic*, July 28, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/07/give-up-on-denuclearizing-north-korea/535347/>; Mira Rapp-Hooper, "America Is Not Going to Denuclearize North Korea," *The Atlantic*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/north-korea-icbm-kim-trump-nuclear/547040/>.

the other hand, a military strike – whether to degrade North Korean forces or to coerce the regime – is unlikely to eliminate its programs and would in all likelihood incur unbearable humanitarian, economic, and strategic costs.⁵⁷ For the foreseeable future, the world will face a regime that possesses the capability to strike U.S. and regional targets with a nuclear weapon.

Policy planning in Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo has not kept pace with Pyongyang's rapid evolution, leaving the conversation marked by inertia. Because denuclearization has been the overriding objective, the United States and its allies have made little progress on developing a coordinated and sustainable North Korea strategy. Though a remarkably broad, bipartisan array of experts have proposed components of that strategy, very little is known about the constellation of concepts, principles, and policy options necessary for managing a nuclear-armed North Korea.

The priorities of deterring, containing, constraining, and transforming a nuclear-armed North Korea should animate that effort.

Deter

The overwhelming imperative for the foreseeable future is to continuously deter a highly capable, rapidly evolving military adversary from aggression against U.S., South Korean,

⁵⁷ Abraham M. Denmark, "The Myth of the Limited Strike on North Korea," *Foreign Affairs*, January 9, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2018-01-09/myth-limited-strike-north-korea>; Van Jackson, "Want to Strike North Korea? It's Not Going to Go the Way You Think," *Politico*, January 12, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/01/12/north-korea-strike-nuclear-strategist-216306>.

and Japanese targets, as well as other extremely destabilizing actions.⁵⁸ The United States and its allies will have to accept the necessity of sustainably deterring a novel adversary – one that is armed with nuclear, chemical, biological, and conventional standoff retaliatory capabilities, highly capable in cyber, but also conventionally inferior.⁵⁹

North Korea is rapidly expanding its capacity for provocation and aggression on land, at sea, in space, and in cyberspace. The United States and its allies must retain the capabilities necessary to credibly retaliate in response to any such aggression. However, the high potential for escalation means that defeating and defending against these attacks will be critical to protecting allied civilians and servicemen. Nuclear deterrence will remain a part of allied posture for the foreseeable future, but is not sufficient to defend against North Korean aggression at lower levels of conflict, which will require that joint conventional forces remain capable and ready.

As the North Korean threat evolves, so must the allied defensive posture. The alliance should consider new deployments of unambiguously defensive forces, including anti-submarine warfare, anti-special operations forces, cyber-defense, as well as measures to ensure that U.S. forces from anywhere in the world can reach South Korea to reinforce allied positions despite North Korean attacks. Deterrence of coercive or limited chemical and biological attacks also demands considerably more attention.

⁵⁸ Abraham Denmark, “The U.S. Can’t Get Rid of North Korea’s Nukes Without Paying a Catastrophic Price,” *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/15/the-u-s-cant-get-rid-of-north-koreas-nukes-without-paying-a-catastrophic-price/>.

⁵⁹ Rebecca K.C. Hersman, “North Korea, Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Instability: Strategic Issues for Managing Crisis and Reducing Risks,” US-Korea Institute, June 2017, <http://www.38north.org/wp-content/uploads/pdf/NKIP-Hersman-062117.pdf>.

It is not enough to deter aggression. Beginning immediately, the allies must work to deter North Korea from other extremely destabilizing and dangerous activities, including an atmospheric nuclear test, continued ballistic missile overflights of Japan, and proliferation of fissile material or nuclear weapons technology.

Contain

Despite its diplomatic isolation, the regime in Pyongyang has never confined its activities to its own borders. North Korean operatives are growing increasingly adept at acting across the globe, spreading financial crimes, smuggling illicit goods, procuring and exporting military equipment, placing North Korean workers in foreign countries to gain currency, stealing funds from banks through cyber intrusion, and a myriad other illicit activities.⁶⁰ North Korea has already sold nuclear technology abroad and may well continue to do so.

A sustainable strategy must work ceaselessly to contain North Korea's destabilizing criminal behavior abroad. In addition to the ongoing activities immediately above, the allies will have to contain types of potential instability, including assassination of North Korean defectors or foreign citizens abroad, attacks against shipping or other economic activities in Asia, cyberattacks against regional infrastructure, and disruption of civilian or military space operations.

⁶⁰ Andrea Berger, "A House Without Foundations: The North Korea Sanctions Regime and Its Implementation," Royal United Services Institute, June 2017, <https://rusi.org/publication/whitehall-reports/house-without-foundations-north-korea-sanctions-regime-and-its>.

Sanctions will be an important tool in this effort, as U.S. laws and U.N. members work to encourage countries to restrict these activities. While the Trump administration has stepped up sanctions enforcement efforts, most existing sanctions are still calibrated to apply political and financial pressure to coerce North Korean denuclearization.

Adjustments will be necessary to calibrate sanctions to deny and contain North Korean illicit behavior.

Negotiations will also be an important component of containing North Korea and so must cover more than a single-minded insistence on denuclearization. The immediate priorities should be to open military-to-military communication channels to prevent North Korean missiles from overflying Japan and avert the first atmospheric nuclear test since 1980.⁶¹

Constrain

Deterrence and containment will be ongoing challenges requiring consistent attention to prevent a catastrophe. The United States and its allies should buttress its deterrence and containment posture with efforts to constrain the regime's ability to challenge it.

Sanctions impose severe constraints on scarce petroleum supplies that the North Korean military relies on to train and operate; the allies should preserve this advantageous position if possible. Maintaining these restrictions could facilitate deterrence over the

⁶¹ James Acton, "Some Nuclear Ground Rules for Kim Jong Un," *Foreign Policy*, August 16, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/16/some-nuclear-ground-rules-for-kim-jong-un/>; Joshua Pollack, "US should start talking with North Korea to prevent nuclear war," *New York Daily News*, August 8, 2017, <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/politics/u-s-start-talking-north-korea-prevent-nuclear-war-article-1.3394949>.

long run. Negotiating conventional arms control measures can also help to constrain North Korea's ability to threaten and aggress against allied forces, without forcing us to recognize their nuclear capabilities.

Preventive restrictions can also be sustained and expanded on North Korea's ability to spread cyber, financial, and illicit transfers. For example, all countries should retain limits on North Korean diplomatic staff stationed around the world who arrange illicit transactions. If at some point there is evidence that Pyongyang is rolling back these illegal activities, it may be possible to lift certain constraint restrictions without requiring that we abandon containment measures, or nuclear, missile, or human rights sanctions. In this way, preventive restrictions afford leverage.

Transform

Even if North Korea is rendered incapable of exerting destructive influence in its region and the world, the existence of a highly militarized, totalitarian state that commits crimes against humanity will remain morally, practically, and legally unacceptable. Any transformation of North Korea will have to occur as the result of an internal process, but South Korea and the United States should seek effective ways of assisting this process. At the very least, allied policies should not inhibit transformation.

In South Korea, ongoing research into unification issues has yielded an understanding of North Korean economic and diplomatic issues that is generally absent in the United States. Concerted attempts to penetrate the regime with information about the outside

world is an important first step, but not a complete strategy.⁶² Is there a virtue to permitting trade from allies or nonaligned countries over the long run, or would continued restrictions constitute leverage to force nuclear weapons back onto the negotiating agenda? Can diplomatic initiatives stabilize the security relationship or advantage moderate voices among ruling elites? The questions will be critical to achieving U.S. and allied objectives over the long run.

Lastly, management of a nuclear-armed North Korea requires strong alliances. Each policy decision discussed above will have to be coordinated with Seoul and also with Tokyo. It will require difficult conversations about economic and diplomatic initiatives, deterrence, and counter-provocation planning (including counterforce, damage limitation, and assassination). Divisions within these alliances or between Seoul and Tokyo will afford North Korea unacceptable opportunities to aggress or escape containment.⁶³

Twenty years ago, it was already cliché to say North Korea was at a crossroads. While Pyongyang has chosen its path and moved rapidly ahead, the United States and its allies still stand at the crossroads wishing that nothing had changed. U.S. strategists in particular are poorly equipped to cope with a failure of a critical policy. As a nation, we want to hear that there is a solution, a way to rectify a setback and make a decisive adjustment to our policy. Yet when the basic assumptions and objectives of a strategy are no longer valid, a failure to replace it will cause irreparable damage to American interests.

⁶² Tom Malinowski, "How to Take Down Kim Jong Un," *Politico*, July 24, 2017,

<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/24/how-to-take-down-kim-jong-un-215411>.

⁶³ Adam Mount, "How to Put the US-South Korean Alliance Back on Track," *Foreign Affairs*, June 28, 2017,

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2017-06-28/how-put-us-south-korean-alliance-back-track>.

Managing a nuclear-armed North Korea will be an arduous task. As Washington comes to recognize that North Korea's nuclear capability cannot be eliminated on acceptable terms, there will be an impulse to withdraw from the issue and move on to soluble problems. Neglect would allow Pyongyang to improve its military position, illicit networks, and coercive leverage, seriously worsening the greatest external threat to American national security. A sustainable and tolerable management strategy will be difficult to devise, and even more difficult to implement. It will require consistent attention, considerable resources, and constant vigilance to a thankless and unpopular task. Yet, having failed, we are left with no choice but to manage an unacceptable situation as best we can.

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