



## Meeting the North Korean Nuclear Challenge

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### Introduction

For the first time since the end of the Cold War, the US faces an opponent – North Korea -- that **is creating a strategic nuclear threat to our homeland and allies in the Pacific region**. This threat is quite different from that posed by international terrorists (e.g. 9/11 attacks) and creates a unique challenge for US national security and policymaking.

When thinking about this threat from North Korea's nuclear weapon & long-range missile programs, **we should consider at least three basic questions**: (1) what are North Korea's strategic goals; (2) why does North Korea want a nuclear weapon arsenal and the ability to strike the US; and, (3) what can and should the US do to protect itself and its Asian allies?

### North Korea's Goals

No one outside of North Korea really knows what the Kim regime wants, but based on its aggressive military posturing, determined strategic nuclear and missile programs, and what the leadership has said, we can deduce the following.

Legitimacy. Since the end of the Korean War in the early 1950s the North Korean leadership has been treated by the US and other countries as essentially illegitimate – a creation by the Soviet Union during the early days of the Cold War and the aggressor in the Korean War. As a result, most nations of the world, principally the US, **have not recognized the legitimacy of the regime and have treated it as a potential enemy**. In its pursuit for legitimacy, the regime has

built a totalitarian state for nearly absolute internal control and an increasingly strong military to defend itself from any outside aggression.

Deterrence. In the absence of a final peace treaty following the end of the Korean War, North Korea has maintained an antagonistic attitude toward the US, including most recently **the threat of using nuclear weapons to balance the military confrontation**. It also maintains significant conventional forces near the DMZ in an effort to hold the Republic of South Korea hostage should the US use military force against it. **North Korea appears to believe that it has largely neutralized US military options by its ability to destroy the South, if attacked by the US.** Nevertheless, the North learned from the US invasion of Iraq and the threatening US-South Korean military exercises that the US cannot be trusted; so, nuclear weapons are required for deterrence.

Unification. A longer term goal is the unification of the Korean Peninsula under its communist regime – something it failed to do militarily in the early 1950s. The US-South Korean alliance is clearly a major obstacle to this ambition. **Therefore, the North strives to undercut the South's confidence in the US as a reliable ally and to neutralize militarily the will and ability of the US to defend the South.**

It is safe to conclude that North Korea continues to pursue these goals. However despite its aggressive military posturing, it is unlikely that the North Korean leadership seeks resumption of military conflict on the Peninsula. The regime must recognize that it might lose everything (i.e. achievement of international legitimacy and eventual unification under its control) if it provoked a military conflict with the US, thereby bringing on its own destruction.

Importance of China. Finally, **the North needs the continued diplomatic and economic support of China, and to a lesser extent Russia, to survive** and to defend against US and UN efforts to pressure it into a more benign and less threatening posture, including the elimination of its nuclear and long-range missile arsenal. It is important to note that a communist North Korea serves China's national security purposes as long as the North does not provoke a military conflict with the US with which Beijing is trying to establish a stable relationship. **As long as the North does not destabilize the Peninsula, it keeps the US military and influence away from China's border.** And China shares the North's desire to see a reduction, if not elimination, of US influence in the region.

## Why a nuclear arsenal?

Countries that have nuclear-weapon arsenals are largely motivated by the need for strategic deterrence and self-preservation; some have also seen such arsenals as bestowing on them prestige and power. Because these motivations are at the core of a country's national security requirements and policy, there is almost no possibility of rolling back this critical strategic military achievement. Based on North Korea's objectives mentioned above, achieving a strategic nuclear capability makes sense. *(See Note #1 below)*

Nuclear attack on the US. The North Korean leadership is not suicidal. Therefore, unless attacked, **there is little risk that they would employ whatever nuclear weapon force they are able to develop against the South or the US.** As mentioned earlier, if they had a mind to do so

they could attack the South using only conventional forces hoping that their nuclear arsenal would deter the US from intervening. **Any launch of a nuclear weapon against US territory would be a risky proposition, possibly leading to their military defeat and total loss of power.**

Leverage & deterrence. Rather, the North Korean leaders more likely hope that their newly established position as a nuclear weapon state **will ultimately force the international community, especially the US, to recognize their legitimacy** as a government and to sign a peace treaty ending both the Korean War armistice and potential US military aggression. This would probably require a non-aggression commitment in any peace treaty.

Undercutting US influence. Meanwhile, Kim appears to be playing a high stakes game of taunting the US, especially President Trump, in an effort to demonstrate that the US is unable and unwilling to risk using its military force to punish the North in defense of the South. **However, because of his unpredictability and growing boldness,** Kim might attack US reconnaissance aircraft or ships as his father and grandfather did and got away with it. And as his father did in Syria, he might try to export nuclear weapons assistance to other countries for economic gain, to win support, or to undermine US influence in other regions.

## What can and should the US do in response?

The US tried unsuccessfully in the 1990s and 2000s to engage the North directly in an effort to halt its nuclear weapon and missile programs. In parallel the US has pushed the UN Security Council to sanction the North. **This latter course of action has been less than effective also in halting the North's aggressive programs given the unhelpful resistance from the Chinese and Russians.** As a result, in 2006 North Korea became a de facto nuclear weapon state after exploding its first device. **It now has at least a modest but growing nuclear weapon arsenal and is pursuing intercontinental ballistic missiles that will reach US territory.**

Thus, other options must be explored and tried. **The US must do more in response to avoid risking its credibility and relations with its allies in the region and elsewhere. An unconstrained nuclear missile armed North Korea has the real potential to call into question the reliability of the US as an alliance partner and to lead to further nuclear proliferation, particularly by Japan.** Tokyo has the technology, if not the will, currently to develop its own nuclear weapon arsenal. As in the case of Israel, a country that cannot count on others to defend it, Japan would likely resort to its own ultimate deterrent capability.

Denuclearization through negotiations. As stressed earlier, short of a total regime change North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear arsenal. Therefore, calls for this outcome through negotiations fall on deaf ears both in the North and among experts who understand the importance of nuclear arsenals for strategic deterrence.

Preemptive strike. Although the US does and should consider all military options, **any US surgical military strike against the North in an effort to eliminate its nuclear weapons would likely result in unacceptable reciprocal casualties and damage to the South (and eventually perhaps to the US).** It is unlikely that the US and others know where all of the North's nuclear facilities are located. Even if we did, because of extensive tunneling the US would likely be unable to destroy them all. And as mentioned above, the North only needs its conventional

forces to overwhelm the South militarily and cause unacceptable death and destruction to a key US ally.

**Therefore, a successful US preemptive strike against the North's nuclear arsenal does not appear to be feasible.** And it is almost certain that such a strike would lead to a break in our alliance with South Korea and efforts to build a stable relationship with China. It also would result in international condemnation and loss of support.

Regime change. Perhaps a total regime change (i.e. removal of Kim and his totalitarian military/intelligence leadership regime) would lead to a significant change in North Korea's internal and external policies. **However, it is unclear how this could be accomplished given China's stake in the region.** As mentioned, China has the most influence on North Korea, but the US would need to convince the Chinese through intense negotiations that China's national security would be enhanced, rather than reduced, by a change in North Korea's leadership. **It is doubtful that China would be happier with a Korean Peninsula looking more like South Korea, especially if the unified Korea maintained a strategic alliance with the US.**

Ballistic missile defenses. The US could bolster its credibility and maintain its strategic position in East Asia by installing an effective anti-ballistic missile (ABM) defense system in both South Korea and Japan. The Chinese would invariably howl, but they bear significant responsibility for North Korea's destabilizing nuclear-weapon developments. **Only with reliable ABM defenses will the North's threats be called into doubt and the faith in US assurances accepted.** The path to a technically reliable ABM system that can intercept ballistic missiles, even a limited attack against our Asian allies and the US, remains difficult. An aggressor can fire against undefended areas, but deploying effective ABM systems to defend the most important Japanese and South Korean areas would go far in rebalancing a currently unopposed threat from North Korea.

Covert action. Although efforts by the US and international community through negotiations, sanctions or other means to eliminate (i.e. *roll back*) North Korea's nuclear weapon arsenal are unlikely to be successful, **it is possible that we and others through covert means might slow down the progress being made as was done in Iran.** Even if successful this would not stop the North's nuclear-weapon program, so we most likely face the reality that the world will have to adjust to a nuclear-weapon capable North Korea.

Containment. **Therefore, containment of North Korea's nuclear arsenal through a strong military posture, international negotiations, stronger sanctions, and missile defenses is probably the only feasible policy alternative for the US and the international community.** Such an approach will likely require some compromises on the part of the US including acceptance of the Kim regime as legitimate. In return, of course, the US and others would need assurance that the North's nuclear arsenal and threats to the South are constrained, perhaps through bilateral negotiations and on-site inspections. The South, Japan, and the rest of East Asia, to say nothing about US citizens, must have confidence that the North's nuclear arsenal will not be used except in its ultimate defense. **Of course, this requires achieving confidence over time that the North's leadership will not do something irrational. As mentioned earlier, we judge that the North most likely would use nuclear weapons only as a last resort to save the regime.** (See Note #2 below)

International negotiations. In an effort to prevent future threats of military aggression and to hold the North accountable to its commitments, **the UN Security Council (UNSC) would need to call for a formal end to hostilities on the Korean Peninsula and ask the General Assembly to negotiate and adopt a peace treaty replacing the current UN Armistice.** This would necessarily include formal international recognition of the legitimacy of the North Korean government. The Council would also need to establish a mechanism and call on UN members to monitor the North's nuclear weapon and other military activities. There remains concern that the North has a clandestine uranium enrichment program that would circumvent any restrictions on its current plutonium program. The UN General Assembly could also call on the Conference on Disarmament (CD) to negotiate a non-aggression treaty on the Korean Peninsula to prevent future military hostilities. (*See Note #3*).

## Conclusion

**So, this is the US policy challenge – can we adjust our policy thinking and diplomacy to recognize the legitimacy of the North Korean government?** Can we adjust to the reality that North Korea will for the foreseeable future remain a nuclear weapon state? **If so, how can we ensure that North Korea does not** (1) proliferate its nuclear capability, as it tried in Syria, (2) misplay its hand thinking it can use a nuclear weapon somewhere without paying the ultimate price, (3) make mischief using chemical or even bio agents somewhere while holding the US at bay due to its nuclear weapons, and (4) fail to abide by any agreements reached?

**This, then, is the reality and opportunity we face – recognize that North Korea is and will likely remain a nuclear-weapon state but induce North Korea to come to an understanding and commitment, including possibly a peace treaty that guarantees its existence in exchange for it becoming a responsible member of the international community.** We ultimately had to do this with North Vietnam, and the results have been quite positive. Certainly, the South Koreans, Chinese and Japanese, probably along with the Russians, would favor this outcome. International sanctions by themselves are not going to do the job. **But a combination of international diplomatic and trade pressure along with possible covert action to slow the North's program, deployment of effective ABM systems in Japan and South Korea, and a promise of international legitimacy and accountability, might bring the beast to heel.** Our South Korean and Japanese allies would be relieved with a reduction of tension and less perceived pressure to obtain their own nuclear weapon capability to defend against North Korea.

Finally, it is possible that the passage of time will alter the course of events that now look inescapable. There might be a falling out within the oligopoly that would lead to disunity within the North Korean leadership and possibly regime change. However, even a less aggressive leadership would unlikely discard its nuclear arsenal for the national security reasons stated above. **Therefore, unless we take the steps suggested above, or the future unexpectedly provides better opportunities and policy options, we are looking at a nuclear armed North Korea that can threaten our key Asian allies and US territory which will seriously erode the current US position in East Asia. The US must act quickly, decisively, and comprehensively to blunt the current unconstrained North Korean belligerency.**

**Notes:**

*#1: Except in the case of South Africa due to its unique situation and the dramatic change in the threat environment in the late 1980s/early 1990s, South Africa at the end of the minority white government was willing to give up its nuclear arsenal. This special case is not likely to be duplicated in North Korea or anywhere else. North Korea's security situation is more closely akin to that of Israel which developed a nuclear arsenal to defend itself from annihilation by its hostile Arab neighbors.*

*#2: In the early days of the Cold War we were unsure whether the Soviet leadership thought it could fight and win a nuclear war to spread communism. It took decades of dialogue and negotiation to conclude that the Soviets were not inclined to provoke their own destruction. North Korea likely wants to ensure its survivability as do both Israel and Pakistan.*

*#3: The UNSC would need to take the lead because the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is chartered to monitor and inspect only those nuclear facilities declared by a country as peaceful. While IAEA inspectors are expected to look for evidence of a weapons program, they are not authorized to inspect a country's nuclear weapon arsenal. The Conference on Disarmament (CD) is the only international body chartered to negotiate nuclear and other weapon treaties such as the BWC, CWC and CTBT. However, all decisions by the CD are taken by consensus. North Korea is a member, so it could block any attempt by the CD to negotiate a treaty limiting the North's nuclear weapon program or arsenal.*