

Mitigating the Nuclear Threat on the Korean Peninsula

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Since the collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2002, subsequent efforts to curtail North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons have been largely focused on **economic coercion** to try to "raise the cost" for the North's nuclear ambitions high enough to convince Pyongyang to abandon this path. However, it has become evident, especially in recent years, that implementation of such sanctions has been incomplete and unable to stop procurement channels. Moreover, despite the negative impact these sanctions have on the North's potential economic development, Pyongyang has clearly decided this is a cost they are willing to pay.

With the pace and demonstration of North Korea's **WMD** development having increased under Kim Jong Un, tolerance for its continued provocations has run thin, and international condemnation of the North's nuclear ambitions spreads. Some worry about the direct threat it poses to its adversaries; some worry more about the indirect threat it poses to the region as countries on the receiving end of Pyongyang's threats react to their rising insecurity; some worry about the threat of **proliferation** especially with the rise of political fragility and terrorism around the world; others worry about the impact this might have.

Although North Korea often claims that its **nuclear deterrent** helps "keep peace" in the region by staving off US military intervention, the opposite is now true. The US and international community have always been opposed to North Korea developing nuclear weapons, but the combination of the North's recent advancements in weapons technology, its unrelenting pace of nuclear and missile testing, and its dramatic and **antagonizing rhetoric**, in fact, have led the US government and a growing faction within the Washington policy community to the conclusion that it's now "time to get tough" on North Korea. What "tough" actually means is still amorphous, but generally falls back on old policy tools including harsher economic sanctions against North Korea, cutting into commercial sectors believed to be raising funds for the North's WMD programs; cracking down on companies and individuals in other countries known to have worked with North Korean designated entities; and imposing tighter controls on banking systems, cutting off Pyongyang's access to dollar-based business transactions and raising the reputational risk of doing business with North Korea.

These coercive measures are certainly not new or unique to the Trump administration. Under the Obama administration, the rationale for increasing these coercive measures was to "sharpen" Pyongyang's choice between economic prosperity and WMD development. The premise was, that North Korea could not pursue both; the hope being, of course, that they would prioritize potential economic performance over a seemingly unnecessary nuclear capability.

In the past, US administrations have been **averse** to public messaging the possibility of military solutions to what they saw as a growing threat from North Korea. They reserved such threats as "all options being on the table" for only the most dire of situations, knowing these threats lack much credibility, given the enormous risk of war that any military actions could spark. But this risk aversion is quickly eroding.

The increasing frequency and provocative nature of North Korea's testing regime is actually sharpening the choices for the US and its allies. While Trump's loose talk of military options and over the top rhetoric toward Pyongyang have been less than constructive on this issue, it has exposed both the fundamental lack of knowledge about North Korea today within government leadership and the increasingly polarized thinking about how the US should deal with the situation, as the status quo—that is, this **escalatory cycle** of provocation and response—is simply not sustainable. While the majority of policymakers and policyshapers understand the potential for catastrophe from any military action, there are emerging thought leaders both inside and outside government who believe it may be the only choice left.

To put this in perspective, the US generally has five categories of policy options: 1) continue the status quo, and try to contain the escalation; 2) acquiesce to a North Korea with nuclear weapons; 3) delegate the problem to other actors; 4) negotiate to try to achieve a denuclearized Korean peninsula; or 5) take military actions.

When it comes to **acquiescence**, there are political reasons, including fear of undermining the **nonproliferation regime**, that prevent the US from formally recognizing North Korea as a nuclear-armed state. But there are domestic reasons now as well. Experts have been warning of the North's technological advancements for years, but the threat it posed for most Americans, including policymakers, was still largely existential. Unlike our allies in the region—South Korea and Japan—who have lived under a real threat from Pyongyang for decades, Americans have had the luxury of being “out of range” and thus, this issue was largely out of mind. However, the successful flight tests of a North Korean inter-continental ballistic missile (the Hwasong-14) in July forced Americans to internalize the North Korean threat as something real and worrisome; fueled by sensationalist media coverage and a general lack of knowledge about North Korea, the North Korean ICBM created a sense of panic among the public. People all across the country were suddenly afraid North Korea would attack, unprovoked, at any minute, especially as Trump began to threaten back. So while in the past, the North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons may have been seen as more of a nuisance to most Americans, the threat perception now high. North Korea has successfully captured the American imagination with active threats (albeit in a retaliatory effort) to use nuclear weapons against the US. The US government has never been willing to politically recognize North Korea as a nuclear-armed state, but American public opinion now means that acquiescence is even less politically feasible.

When it comes to delegation, the US strategy, especially under the Obama administration and the beginning of the Trump administration, has been to push responsibility for this problem onto China. There is a prevailing belief that China's economic influence over North Korea provides substantial enough leverage to force Pyongyang back to the negotiating table. However, as we have seen over the past eight years, there are fundamental flaws to this approach.

First, China and the United States have different national security interests that are unlikely to fully align on desired approaches or outcomes on this issue. Second, the idea that leveraging economic influence will, for sure, elicit a specific response from North Korea is a false assumption. Furthermore, given the North's adaptability to sanctions in the past, although they may struggle under the weight of increased economic pressures, they will likely find ways to survive.

Most importantly though, even if China could bring North Korea to the table, the question is to the table with whom? Without the US being willing to negotiate with North Korea directly or in a multilateral forum, Chinese efforts to **coerce** North Korea back to talks ring rather hollow. After all, the United States is Pyongyang's main adversary, not China, and the idea that China could broker a deal on America's behalf that guaranteed certain US actions and policies, is simply not credible.

While there is wide agreement in the US and among our allies, as well as among regional actors, that there are “no good military options” in this situation, there is a growing belief that there is no good negotiating options either. While North Korea has posed negotiations to the US in the past (through state media) and still continues to frame its stance as not being willing to negotiate on nuclear issues “unless the US hostile policy is removed,” suggesting there is still a formula in which nuclear issues can be negotiated, the gestures have been lost in a sea of propaganda and brinkmanship and in the unrelenting stream of missile tests. More and more, experts and officials both inside and outside of US government are interpreting these actions as “Kim Jong Un not being willing to negotiate.”

With each new test and more advanced missile type, a growing segment of **pundits** posit that it is already too late for negotiations—believing North Korea is too far along in its program to be ever willing to reverse course. Furthermore, there is a general tendency to oversimplify the diplomatic track record with North Korea, seeing only the current state of North Korea’s WMD program as testament to how futile negotiating with North Korea is, rather than understanding the nuanced successes and failures within that long diplomatic history.

We can see this debate over whether negotiations are even worth trying played out in White House. Trump’s recent tweet about how “talking is not the answer!” however, simplistic, is not simply the ravings of an inexperienced president, but reflect a strong conservative narrative that has become ever more resolute in the belief that any negotiation with North Korea would just appease the North Koreans, but get nothing in return. Sec. of Defense Mattis’ contradictory follow up statement though, that there are no good military options and that we must find diplomatic solutions, illustrates both the divisive thinking on this issue and the mixed messaging of this administration.

The US government, having had agreements fall apart quickly after coming to terms both in bilateral and multilateral formats, is reluctant to be humiliated with failure again. Thus, it tends to withhold talks until it sees either concrete signs that North Korea wants to negotiate, such as Pyongyang making **unilateral concessionary measures** in order to prove its “sincerity,” or until the North provides some kind of assurance that success is possible. Consequently, if success cannot be guaranteed, especially within a short amount of time, there is a growing belief that it is not an option worth trying.

However, the North’s stepped up testing, and increasingly confident, aggressive and antagonizing posture, has made the **status quo** no longer tenable either, given the escalatory cycle of provocation and response. The decisions made among the US and its allies to take additional defensive measures against a rising North Korean threat have sparked agitation and retaliatory measures from China and Russia, heightening tensions in the region that are further exacerbated with each new North Korean nuclear and missile test. Doubling down on sanctions without providing diplomatic off-ramps further antagonizes tense relations among the big powers, making cooperation on solving this issue more difficult to achieve. This is the status quo now, and this is essentially a path toward war. Simply applying more “pressure” on the situation is only going to push us down that path faster.

The bottom line is that North Korea has, in fact, sharpened the US choices on this issue. But this narrowing of scope is an increasingly dangerous one, especially with a US president who is inexperienced at diplomacy and has little understanding of the **geopolitics** of Asia, who has a fragile ego and low domestic approval ratings, who is mired in domestic turmoil and investigations, and who is looking for ways to look strong without much thought to the consequences of his words or actions. This is not a formula for bold diplomatic initiatives, as some may have expected Trump to attempt given his business reputation; especially when North Korea’s constant testing and harsh rhetoric leaves little room for diplomatic solutions to get off the ground.

So far, the US policy of “getting tough” on North Korea has mainly been focused on coercive measures, stemming largely from the belief that negotiations won’t work and a reluctance to take military actions. But with each new and more aggressive North Korean WMD test, the sustainability of the status quo diminishes, the political will to try negotiations faces more criticism and voices advocating military strikes and preventive actions gain more traction. The danger in sharpening choices, is that the options may be whittled down to the choice you don’t want made. De-escalating the situation is going to take all sides—including North Korea—deciding military choices are not in anyone’s best interest, and taking steps to restore options back to the menu before it is too late.

Key Vocabulary: Please define the following

1. economic coercion:

2. WMD:

3. proliferation:

4. nuclear deterrent:

5. antagonizing rhetoric:

6. acquiescence:

7. mitigate:

8. pundits:

9. unilateral concessionary measures:

10. status quo:

11. geopolitics:

Next Steps:

1) What was the author's main point?

2) What are several factors that influence the author's recommendation?

3) Do you agree with the author's conclusion? What would you suggest to the President?

