

A Strategy for Dealing with North Korea

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North Korea is on the verge of developing boosted energy nuclear weapons with higher yield-to-weight ratios. It is test-launching mobile ICBMs and intermediate-range missiles to deliver them. It is churning out plutonium and highly enriched uranium at a rate of six or more bombs' worth a year.



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Such an unbounded North Korean weapons program poses a clear and present danger to U.S. and allied security. That makes it a matter of great urgency to negotiate a suspension of its nuclear and missile testing and fissile material production even if the North is unwilling to recommit to complete denuclearization up front. Have no doubt about it: complete denuclearization remains the ultimate goal. But demanding that Pyongyang make that pledge or take concrete steps to that end before talks begin will only delay possible agreement, enabling it to add to its military wherewithal and bargaining leverage in the meantime.

Soon after taking office President Trump wisely resumed diplomatic engagement with

Pyongyang. Those talks are now in abeyance. Restarting them is imperative. Pressure without negotiations has never worked in the past with Pyongyang and there is no reason to think it will work in a timely way now.

How long will it take for sanctions to compel North Korea to accept U.S. terms for talks? How many ICBMs and nuclear arms will it make in the meantime? Talks just might yield results a lot sooner. With that in mind, the administration might allow at least a three-month implementation period for sanctions recently enacted by Congress to allow time for talks to resume.

Washington is preoccupied with getting Beijing to put more pressure on Pyongyang. Yet it is worth recalling that on three occasions when China and the United States worked together in the U.N. Security to impose tougher sanctions - in 2006, 2009, and 2013, North Korea responded by conducting nuclear tests in an effort to drive them apart.

That did not happen after Washington and Beijing agreed on the much tougher Security Council sanctions last November. Instead, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un defied widespread expectations that he would soon conduct a sixth nuclear test - a signal of restraint in the expectation that President Trump would open talks.

The recent North Korean ICBM test-launches underscore how the prospect of tougher sanctions without talks prompts Pyongyang to step up arming. The Trump administration's policy of "maximum pressure and engagement" can only succeed if nuclear diplomacy is soon resumed and the North's security concerns are

addressed.



North Korean image of July 28 launch

Trump's Actions

Diplomatic engagement is not out of the question. Trump's mercurial policy-making is understandably grounds for caution, but not for ignoring evidence of the course he was on.

During his campaign for the presidency, Donald Trump repeatedly spoke of holding talks with North Korea.¹ While public attention has been distracted by the American show of force and talk of tighter sanctions, the Trump administration made several subtle moves to jettison the failed policies of the past and open the way to talks.

For instance, it went ahead with token flood relief for North Korea — the first US humanitarian aid in five years—which President Barack Obama had authorized on his last full day in office.²

Even after the successful test-launch of a solid-fueled medium-range ballistic missile, the KN-15, and the assassination of Kim Jong Nam in February, the State Department issued visas for a North Korean delegation led by Choe Son Hui, director-general of American Affairs at the DPRK Foreign Ministry, ostensibly to attend a Track II meeting in New York—again for the

first time in five years. They withdrew the visas shortly thereafter when it was reported that the cause of Kim Jong Nam's death was VX nerve agent.³

In a break with his predecessors, Trump himself went out of his way to sound exceedingly diplomatic to Kim Jong Un. In a May 1 interview with *Bloomberg News*, after saying that "under the right circumstances I would meet with [Kim]," Trump was remarkably respectful: "If it would be appropriate for me to meet with him, I would absolutely. I would be honored to do it."⁴

Most significant of all, the administration backed away from U.S. insistence that North Korea commit to denuclearization up front before it would enter into talks. In an April 28 interview with NPR, Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson characterized denuclearization as a "goal," not a condition, for talks: "It is our goal. It is our *only* goal." He spelled it out, "We have been very clear as to what our objectives are. And equally clear what our objectives are not. And we do not seek regime change, we do not seek a collapse of the regime, we do not seek an accelerated reunification of the peninsula. We seek a denuclearized Korean Peninsula—and again that is entirely consistent with the objectives of others in the region as well."⁵

Tillerson told the UN Security Council on April 28 what the administration wants: "North Korea must take concrete steps to reduce the threat that its illegal weapons programs pose to the United States and our allies before we can even consider talks."⁶ The North may have already taken the most concrete step by not conducting a sixth nuclear test. How long that restraint may last is a serious concern.



US test of THAAD anti-missile system

Washington, Not Beijing Has the Key to Pyongyang

The administration is pressing China by threatening sanctions. It is losing sight of the fact that it is North Korea that it needs to persuade, not China. Insisting that China do more ignores North Korean strategy. During the Cold War, Kim Il Sung played China off against the Soviet Union to maintain his freedom of maneuver. In 1988, anticipating the collapse of the Soviet Union, he reached out to improve relations with the United States, South Korea and Japan in order to avoid overdependence on China. That has been the Kims' aim ever since.

From Pyongyang's vantage point, that aim was the basis of the 1994 Agreed Framework, which committed Washington to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations," or, in plain English, end enmity. That was also the essence of the September 2005 Six-Party Joint Statement in which Washington and Pyongyang pledged to "respect each other's sovereignty, exist peacefully together, and take steps to normalize their relations subject to their respective bilateral policies" as well as to "negotiate a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula."

For Washington, suspension of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs was the point of these agreements, which succeeded for a time

in shuttering the North's production of fissile material and stopping the test-launches of medium and longer-range missiles. Both agreements collapsed, however, when Washington did little to implement its commitment to improve relations and Pyongyang reneged on denuclearization.

In the case of the 1994 Agreed Framework, when Washington was slow to live up to its obligations, the North Koreans began acquiring the means to enrich uranium. In the ill-fated October 2002 meeting with Assistant Secretary James Kelly, the North Koreans addressed uranium enrichment, but in Condoleezza Rice's words, "Because his instructions were so constraining, Jim couldn't fully explore what might have been an opening to put the program on the table."⁷

Similarly, in the case of the September 2005 six-party joint statement, believing that North Korea's declaration of its nuclear program in 2007 was incomplete, the United States decided, in the words of Secretary of State Rice, to "move up issues that were to be taken up in phase three, like verification, like access to the reactor, in phase two."⁸ The North eventually agreed orally to key steps. When they refused to put them in writing, South Korea, in response, reneged on providing promised energy aid in 2008 and the North Koreans conducted a failed satellite launch.⁹

What Now?

That past is prologue. Now there are indications that a suspension of North Korean missile and nuclear testing and fissile material production may again prove negotiable. In return for suspension of its production of plutonium and enriched uranium, the Trading with the Enemy Act sanctions imposed before the nuclear issue arose could be relaxed for a third time and energy assistance unilaterally halted by South Korea in 2008 could be resumed under recently elected President

Moon Jae-in.



An agreement will require addressing Pyongyang’s security needs, including adjusting our joint exercises with South Korea, for instance by suspending flights of nuclear-capable B-52 bombers into Korean airspace. Those flights were only resumed to reassure allies in the aftermath of the North’s nuclear tests. If those tests are suspended, the B-52 flights can be, too, without any sacrifice of deterrence. North Korea is well aware of the reach of U.S. ICBMs and SLBMs, which were recently test-launched.

The United States can also continue to bolster, rotate, and exercise forces in the region so conventional deterrence will remain robust. At the same time it would be prudent to tone down the saber-rattling rhetoric lest the two sides stumble into a deadly clash they do not want. As Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has recently underscored, a war in Korea would be “more serious in terms of human suffering than anything we have seen since 1953.”¹⁰

The chances of persuading North Korea to go beyond another temporary suspension to dismantle its nuclear and missile programs are slim without firm commitments from Washington and Seoul to move toward political and economic normalization, engage in a peace

process to end the Korean War, and negotiate regional security arrangements, among them a nuclear-weapon-free zone that would provide a multilateral legal framework for denuclearization.¹¹ In that context, President Trump’s willingness to hold out the prospect of a summit with Kim Jong Un would also be a significant inducement.

Although the September 2005 joint statement of Six Party Talks explicitly called for the parties “to negotiate a peace regime for Korea” and “to explore ways and means for promoting security cooperation in Northeast Asia,” little planning has been undertaken in allied capitals to implement those commitments. Seoul could take the lead in mapping out ways to do so and coordinate them with Washington. A proposal for such a comprehensive security settlement is appended here.

In closing, much about North Korea rightly repels Americans. Goose-stepping troops and gulags, a regime motivated by paranoia and insecurity to menace its neighbors, leaders who mistreat their people and assassinate or execute officials for not toeing the party line, a state that committed horrific acts like its 1950 aggression and the 2010 sinking of the Cheonan. It is a core American belief that bad states cause most trouble in the world. North Korea, with its one-man rule, cult of personality, internal regimentation, and dogmatic devotion to *juche* ideology is a decidedly bad state. That’s what Americans know about North Korea.

A wise Korean analyst once wrote, “Finding the truth about the North’s nuclear program is an example of how what we ‘know’ sometimes leads us away from what we need to learn.” The best way to learn is to enter into talks about talks and probe whether Pyongyang is willing to change course.

This is a revised and expanded version of an [article](#) that appeared at the *Nautilus Peace and Security Policy Forum*

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Notes

¹ For the details, Leon V. Sigal, "One Impulse for Trump to Heed," *Arms Control Today*, 47, 1 (January/February 2017, pp. 14-17).

² Baik Sungwon, "U.S. Humanitarian Aid Goes to North Korea Despite Nuclear Tensions," VOA, January 25, 2017. The DPRK later confirmed the aid. Cf., KCNA, "U.S. Government Decides to Offer Aid to DPRK," February 11, 2017.

³ Jonathan Cheng, "Planned Back-Channel Talks between U.S., North Korea Scuttled," *Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2017.

⁴ Margaret Talev and Jennifer Jacobs, "Trump Says He'd Meet with Kim under Right Circumstances," *Bloomberg News*, May 1, 2017.

⁵ NPR, Transcript: NPR Interviews Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, April 28, 2017.

⁶ Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, "Remarks at the U.N. Security Council Ministerial Session on DPRK," April 28, 2017.

⁷ Condoleezza Rice, *No Higher Honor: A Memoir of My Years in Washington* (New York: Crown, 2011), p. 162.

⁸ Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Address at the Heritage Foundation, "U.S. Policy towards Asia," June 18, 2007.

⁹ For more details, "What Have Twenty-Five Years of Nuclear Diplomacy Achieved?" in Kyung-ok Do, Jeong-ho Roh, and Henri Feron, *Pathways to a Peaceful Korean Peninsula: Denuclearization, Reconciliation and Cooperation* (Seoul: Korean Institute for National Reunification and Columbia Law School Center for Korean Studies, 2016), ch. 2.

¹⁰ Yonhap, "U.S. Exhausting All Diplomatic Efforts to Resolve N.K. Nuclear Issue without Using Force: Mattis," *Korea Herald*, June 16, 2017.

¹¹

See the proposal by Morton H. Halperin, Peter Hayes, Moon Chung-in, Thomas Pickering, and Leon Sigal, [Ending the North Korean Nuclear Threat by a Comprehensive Security Settlement in Northeast Asia](#)," NAPSnet Policy Forum, June 28, 2017.