

ISSUE BRIEF

Managing the Korean Conundrum

Bad, Worse, and Wild Cards

OCTOBER 2017 TODD M. ROSENBLUM

Tensions on the Korean Peninsula have vexed US policy makers for generations. But for American citizens, problems of stability on the peninsula, and North Korean threats to its neighbors were problems over there. Not anymore. North Korea's dual advances in nuclear weapons and intercontinental delivery systems are edging the situation toward profound. Ever since the term proliferation of weapons of mass destruction entered the lexicon, we have dreaded the idea of a dangerous, wildly unpredictable state—seemingly impervious to sanction—acquiring the capability to hold the US homeland hostage. Yet, that time is approaching. North Korea may be a few years off, as it still needs to perfect its long-range ballistic missiles and miniaturize a nuclear warhead on its cone, but strategic thresholds have been crossed, and we appear no closer to solving the problem.

More sanctions, more isolation, more rhetoric, more pressure on China, and more covert action may delay Pyongyang's march, but we must now ask ourselves even harder questions about deep trade-offs, if we are to change trajectories. How far is the United States willing to go to get the right actors to take the right steps? Is it time to see if Chinese post-unification security concerns can be sufficiently alleviated to allow it to consider walking away from the idea of a nation called North Korea?

Strategic Context

The profound crisis with North Korea has been building since the early 1990s, when the international community discovered that North Korea had secretly constructed a plutonium production plant essential for a nuclear weapons program. By that time, there was already strong concern about North Korea's development, export, and illicit ballistic missile cooperation with Iran and Pakistan. Also, early Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) missiles were of Russian/Chinese design origin, which served to reveal the technical basis for North Korea's largely indigenous advances. This was occurring, of course, within the context of the unstable and threatening situation between the North, South, China, and United States on the peninsula.

The co-development of the North Korean nuclear program with its ballistic missile program is of great concern to the United States. North Korean missiles have posed a direct threat to Japan and South Korea for

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years, which, given our treaty obligations and national interest, would draw us into the conflict.

This threat also tested our bilateral relationship with South Korea. South Korea believed its core security was threatened and undertook its own long-range cruise missile and exploratory nuclear weapons programs. These moves by the South complicated Seoul's already complex relationship with Japan. Each aggressive response by the South further threatened the status quo. This instability played into China's desire to split South Korea from its trilateral relationship with the United States and Japan.

The United States seriously considered preemptive strikes against North Korea in 1994, after Pyongyang's covert nuclear program was discovered. Then Secretary of Defense Bill Perry ultimately did not recommend this action to the president after concluding it would kill hundreds of thousands of civilians, most of whom would be in South Korea. Secretary Perry, like his predecessors and successors, could not get around the awful reality that North Korea's estimated 8,000 rockets and artillery had the range to hit South Korea's capital city of Seoul and that there would be hundreds of thousands of strikes, which would take days to fully attrite. Current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Joseph Dunford said in late July that conflict on the peninsula would lead to "loss of life unlike any we have experienced since World War II." James Thurman, US Commander in South Korea from 2011 to 2013, estimates that there are nearly 250,000 American citizens living in Seoul.

Given the immutable fact of Seoul's deep vulnerability, the United States, South Korea, North Korea, and China began Four Party peace talks in 1997. These talks were technically decoupled from bilateral US-DPRK nuclear nonproliferation talks, but the reality is that linkages continue to exist. China then, as today, was unwilling to see North Korea collapse, and would only go so far with pressure. (China also is opposed to North Korea's nuclear weapons and long-range ballistic missile programs and rejected a request by Pyongyang in the 1960s to provide it with nuclear weapons grade production capability.)

While little to no diplomatic progress was made on the North Korean ballistic missile program, the United States and DPRK concluded the Agreed Framework in 1994, according to which the North would dismantle its plutonium program in exchange for proliferation

resistant reactors, aid, and assistance. The United States would not agree to North Korean demands for a bilateral peace treaty that excluded the South. The Agreed Framework effectively collapsed in 2002, when the world learned that North Korea was developing an alternative path to nuclear weapons, via highly enriched uranium (HEU), and was caught exporting HEU to Pakistan. Near-term nonproliferation diplomacy with the DPRK seemingly suffered a fatal blow when North Korea tested a nuclear device in 2006, but new freeze agreements were signed and violated. North Korea has conducted nuclear device tests at least five times and is believed to have a current stockpile of ten to twenty nuclear devices. Nonproliferation expert Joseph Cirincione estimates that the DPRK likely will have one hundred nuclear devices, and the ability to miniaturize warheads on intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) by 2020.

Concurrent with the US vital interest in preventing the further spread of nuclear weapons—a concern shared by China—is the goal of preventing more nations from developing long-range ballistic and cruise missiles. Missiles of regional range could draw the United States into conflict; but for more nations, like North Korea and Iran, having the ability to deliver nuclear payloads to the homeland would be a profound check on our national security latitude. Marrying long-range delivery systems with a nuclear device is exponentially more threatening to US sovereignty. Stanford University Professor Gordon Chang asserts that Iranian officials were present for all five North Korean nuclear tests.

North Korea's march toward a long-range, or intercontinental, ballistic missile capability has been of deep concern to the United States since 1998 when Pyongyang first launched a small satellite into outer space. Indeed, former Secretary of Defense Perry again raised the specter of preemptive action when he and future Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter declared in a 1996 op-ed: "If North Korea persists in its launch preparations, the United States should immediately make clear its intention to strike and destroy"¹ the missile on the pad. Secretary Perry recently revised this recommendation because of North Korean advances, saying "even if you think it was a good idea at the time, it's not a good idea today."²

1 David Sanger, "What Can Trump Do About North Korea? His Options are Few and Risky," *New York Times*, July 4, 2017.

2 *Ibid.*



Mass games in Pyongyang, North Korea, August 2007. *Photo credit: (stephan)/Flickr.*

North Korea, on July 4, 2017, appeared to have successfully tested an ICBM for the first time. North Korea named the missile the Hwasong-14. Preliminary public reporting indicates the missile could have a range of 6,700 to 8,000 km, making it capable of reaching Hawaii and Alaska, but not the continental United States. Also significant is North Korea's recent achievement in building a solid fuel rocket engine. Solid fuel rockets are more stable than older liquid fuel rockets, can be prepared for launch much faster, and can be transported on mobile launchers. Many experts believed North Korea would not achieve its recent success until at least 2020, recognizing a single test does not make a reliable weapon, and its ability to marry a miniaturized nuclear warhead to its ICBM remains an essential, technical gap. US intelligence officials reportedly have moved forward the date by which North Korean missiles could reach American homeland shores; currently, the estimate is next year according to recent reporting by the *Washington Post*.

Current Dynamics

North Korea has checked the international community. It has demonstrated the ability to withstand withering sanctions that have caused deep pain and suffering to its people, to sustain its nuclear weapons production and testing program, to continue its technical march toward building an ICBM capable of attacking the United States, and not to box in China so thoroughly that Beijing would reconsider whether it was preferable to risk North Korean collapse and the probability of a unified peninsula in alignment with the United States.

North Korea has maintained enough rockets and artillery to deter preemptive strikes or conventional conflict on the peninsula. Its nuclear weapons program(s) are dispersed and hardened, so taking them out kinetically is not realistic. Former lead US negotiator to the Six Party Peace Talks, Ambassador Christopher Hill, said in July that North Korea's nuclear ambitions are "quite

large,” and that our focus at this point needs to be on stopping its advances in delivery systems.³

Much is said about pressuring China to end its policy of life support for the North. US President Donald Trump’s administration and many others have highlighted the rise in percentage of trade between the People’s Republic of China and DPRK. This is problematic, but overstated. China may now account for 90 percent of North Korean trade with the outside world but that is an increase due more to former North Korean trading partners halting trade with the rogue nation. In the early 2000s, China accounted for just one-third of North Korea’s foreign trade, but according to the National Committee on North Korea and the East-West Center, non-Chinese and South Korea trade with the North declined from roughly \$1.5 billion annually between 2000-2005 to \$540 million in 2015.⁴ The rise in the percentage of Chinese trade with the North is best seen as a pullback in non-Chinese trade.

China has used its economic leverage on the North on occasion, but only in limited terms, such as when it suspended coal purchases from the DPRK in February 2017 for conducting a ballistic missile test in contravention of United Nations Security Council resolutions. Coal trade accounts for more than one-third of North Korean trade and about \$400 million annually in hard currency, according to the South Korean government. But China will not fully close the outlet because, as stated earlier, its greater concern is a unified, pro-US peninsula. American China scholar Bonnie Glaser concludes that China may do more in response to President Trump’s call, but “will not do what we really want.” President Trump may continue to tweet about trade sanctions on China for not completely cutting off the DPRK, but Chinese leverage on the United States is strong and his remarks are rhetoric not reality.

South Korea, too, will proceed with great caution, and no US military action is viable without Seoul’s concurrence. The history of US and South Korean policy toward the North is one of alternating between good cop and bad cop. There are periods in which

Seoul leans toward rapprochement, such as during the Sunshine Policy era under former President Kim Dae Jung in the early 2000s, and to a lesser extent today under President Moon Jae In’s policy of engagement. South Koreans were deeply fearful of proposed US preemptive strikes in 1994. The United States in turn has often played the mediator during crises at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), such as when North Korea launched rockets and artillery near South Korean shores in 2010 and 2014 (killing two civilians). The United States applied great pressure on the South to stop it from pursuing its own nuclear deterrent and deep strike missiles.

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South Korean ambassador to the United States, Ahn Ho-Young, told a security forum in July that American extended deterrence is core to South Korea (and Japan), and is a global credibility issue for the United States. President Trump reaffirmed that the United States will “defend the ROK [South Korea] against any attack and both presidents remain committed to jointly addressing the threat posed by the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK),” in a joint statement with President Moon at the conclusion of their June 29-30, 2017 summit meeting at the White House.⁵ This statement reaffirms that Seoul is not just an important participant but a central, core actor in all efforts to address threats from Pyongyang.

Of course, there are other leverage points to alter the trajectory of current dynamics. South Korea’s

3 Remarks by Christopher Hill, 2017 Aspen Security Forum, Aspen, CO, July 22, 2017.

4 Daniel Wertz and Grace Ruch Clegg, “The Value-and Limits-of Data on North Korea’s External Relations,” *38 North*, US-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins SAIS, June 22, 2017, <http://www.38north.org/2017/06/dwertzgclegg062217/>.

5 “Remarks by President Trump and President Moon of the Republic of Korea Before Bilateral Meeting,” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 30, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/06/30/remarks-president-trump-and-president-moon-republic-korea-bilateral>.

willingness to see through the decision made by the previous government to purchase and fully deploy the US-made Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) is of some solace to South Korean security but is extremely annoying (and nonthreatening) to China, because it deepens the trilateral security alliance with Japan and the United States and undermines Beijing's goal to be the exclusive large power in the South China Sea. Both Gordon Chang and Joseph Cirincione conclude that THAAD is important symbolically but will not provide national defense for South Korea, Japan, or US forces in the region.

Expanding and targeting sanctions against companies doing business with North Korea also is an important element of leverage with China. Stronger sanctions include denying access to the US banking system to any person or entity doing business with North Korea. This tack essentially shuts entities out of international trade and financing. While critical and significant, this approach may not be fully applied because sanctioning larger Chinese entities would elicit a forceful blockage preventing access for US businesses to Chinese markets.

David Sanger of the *New York Times* reports that the United States has an active, covert sabotage program aimed at weakening North Korea's missile launch program, to be enacted via third parties, foreign parts suppliers, and digital strikes, but efforts to date have not stopped North Korean advances. Sanger reports that North Korea switched rocket suppliers after a "remarkable series of missile failures."⁶ This effort may be slowing down the North in certain areas, but this—thus far—does not appear to offer a strategic fix.

Continuing the deployment of more US ground-based interceptors (GBI) and modernizing early warning radars in the region are vital to homeland deterrence preservation. The offense-defense cost and reliability ratio tilts in favor of offense for large powers like China and Russia, but can still be effective against small numbers of incoming threats, like those from North Korea. This is a "holding solution" against future, larger numbers of nuclear missiles launched by North Korea against the United States, but it certainly will offer us some protection and freedom of action through the next decade.

6 David Sanger, "U.S. Cyberweapons, Used Against Iran and North Korea, Are a Disappointment Against ISIS," *New York Times*, June 12, 2017.

The highest risk option is a blockade without Chinese support. China (and Russia) have already made clear that they will not support such an effort. Moscow and Beijing are offering the unserious position of a "freeze for a freeze," whereby democratic South Korea and the United States freeze annual military exercises in exchange for a North Korean freeze on its missile programs. The Chinese and Russian leaders understand that it is far easier (and more likely) for North Korea to overturn its freeze than it would be for the United States and South Korea to end an agreed cessation. This would put the burden of resuming exercises on the United States and ROK amid charges that resuming shows of force would be hostile and a violation of the "status quo." South Korean President Moon does not support the double freeze option, according to his ambassador to the United States.

The wild card on the table, which gets too little consideration in the United States, involves engaging China for a long-term solution that addresses Beijing's strategic interests on the peninsula. The obvious point of contention is the future orientation of a unified Korean peninsula. Would China be willing to move from its support of the Kim dynasty in exchange for agreement from Washington to remove all foreign troops from Korea? This, of course, is a profound proposition and must have South Korean support. The South, understandably, will be deeply offended that foreign powers are again attempting to determine its fate. But like China, it gets something big in return. China would get the removal of the US military footprint from its border. South Korea would inherit the daunting mess of reunification, but the absorption would be under its terms. Both China and the United States would likely need to pledge major assistance packages that consider both humanitarian considerations and joint efforts to ensure the peninsula's denuclearization (potentially a point of South Korean resistance). The United States would need to resist inevitable Chinese calls for a military withdrawal from Japan.

The Diplomatic Hail Mary⁷

Perhaps, then, we need to ask ourselves some very hard questions about what we are really willing to give to get Chinese support for fully ending its backing of

7 This section is adapted from Todd Rosenblum, "How to persuade China to abandon North Korea," originally published in *POLITICO*, July 18, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/agenda/story/2017/07/18/china-north-korea-american-troops-removal-000476>.



Air Force and Marine Corps aircraft conduct a mission with the South Korean air force over the Korean Peninsula in response to North Korea's intermediate range ballistic missile launch on September 14, 2017. *Photo credit: US Pacific Command/Flickr.*

the North Korean regime. What will it take for Beijing to change its calculus on unification? Are there things that could persuade China to give up on its buffer state against the United States?

The answer is yes. In fact, many national security experts know what the Chinese would demand: China wants the US military off the peninsula. South Korea is a vital defense, security, and trade partner of the United States. There are nearly 30,000 US troops stationed on South Korean soil, down from more than 300,000 Americans who were stationed in Korea in 1951, but still a significant number. The United States and South Korea are also treaty allies; Washington is obligated to defend South Korea if attacked.

Here's how a deal could work: The United States would agree to eventually remove all 30,000 troops from South Korea and close its military bases post-unification. We could even consider ending our treaty with South Korea. In return, China would not only cease its support for North Korea but help end the Kim dynasty altogether, leaving behind a unified,

democratic Korea that swears off nuclear weapons. The United States and China would jointly engage South Korea on its absorption of the North, since South Korea knows the cost of German reunification and is appropriately leery of reintegrating 25 million starved, information-deprived people into a modern state.

Is eliminating the US military presence on the peninsula a fair price for China finally—and fully—pulling the plug on North Korea? It is a difficult question with huge security and economic implications, and I am honestly not sure about the answer. The rapid fall of the Kim regime is not guaranteed under such a deal and there is a real possibility that a unified Korea would align more closely with China than the United States, thereby undermining our strength in the region. The US-Japan-South Korean alliance is always under stress; ending it would take away a core pillar of US policy, much to China's delight.

But unlike our previous strategies on North Korea, this one would at least have a real shot at advancing our strategic interests while avoiding a bloody and

destabilizing war. That is because there could be a lot for Beijing to like in it. A deal would enhance China's ability to dominate the region as the primary military power. Its muscle flexing has grown exponentially in the past decade, ranging from seizing disputed islands and militarizing self-built artificial reefs, declaring an Air Defense Identification Zone over much of the South and East China Seas, and commencing sea trials of its first aircraft carrier. Withdrawing the massive US military footprint in Korea will further embolden Chinese expansionism.

Interestingly, a retired Chinese major general was recently permitted to publish a journal article on North Korea that may have been a signal, reflecting potential terms acceptable to China. In his article, General Wang Haiyun said Beijing would "draw a red line" if the United States attacked North Korea without Chinese approval. China, he went on, should demand that any US military attack result in "no nuclear contamination, no US occupation of areas north of the current demarcation line between the North and South, and no regime hostile to China be established in the North."⁸ Might the general have been permitted to present these preliminary points of possible commonality with Seoul and Washington for future dialogue?

How will Koreans themselves feel about foreign powers once again trying to dictate its post-unification self-determination? A unified Korea would have to agree to terms of dismantling, denuclearizing, and living with limited power projection. In return, the United States, China, and other countries would donate tens of billions to rebuild the north. That cost must be factored into any consideration of such a deal.

These are just a small sampling of the large and small issues associated with this idea. Even commencing discussion of a US-China-Korea deal on the future of North Korea would carry huge risks. The Kim dynasty will not allow for a smooth transition; if it believes that its sovereignty is at risk, it could launch a preemptive strike to ensure its survival. We must be ready for all possibilities.

As a first step, the United States, China, and South Korea should establish a strategic future working group to create space for conceptual discussion of what a unified Korean Peninsula would look like and

what core redlines exist for each nation. This might be best pursued in a semi-official capacity—often referred to as a Track 1.5 or 2 setting—that pulls together informed experts from each country who are freer to discuss contours of controversial arrangements, while giving governments plausible deniability that this is happening under official auspices.

Conclusions

There are core assumptions about the North Korean nuclear and missile threat that must be taken into account if we are to fashion an approach that has a better probability of success. Vital assumptions include the following:

- North Korea is not prepared to negotiate away its nuclear weapons and long-range missile programs. Cessation will come only from extreme pressure.
- China will not allow the North Korean regime to collapse, unless it is assured that its vital, post-unification interests are taken into account. This will be difficult for the United States and for South Korea.
- North Korea is unlikely to succumb to sanctions. As long as the North Korean security apparatus has access to normal food and accommodations and occasional luxury goods, it will defend the Kim Dynasty. North Korea's general population may suffer horribly, but the elites know they will lose everything—including their lives—in regime change.
- There is no real military option without mass casualties in the South. Even suggesting that South Korea be asked to absorb the death of hundreds of thousands of its civilians is not possible. Even if it were possible, North Korea's nuclear program is too big and dispersed to be "taken out" kinetically.
- Covert action, via humans and cyber, to undermine or even just delay North Korea's march toward holding the US mainland hostage is strongly desirable but would have been done already if possible. Efforts should and will continue on this front but there is no track record of clandestine action leading to threat elimination in North Korea, Iran, or elsewhere.

No one should be under the illusion that US-China-South Korea diplomacy success is possible, and there

⁸ Jeremy Page, "China Prepares for a Crisis Along North Korea Border," *Wall Street Journal*, July 24, 2017.

is an equal chance we will be living with a nuclear North Korea that can use its missile forces to hold the US homeland hostage. This latter outcome would upend much of our national security freedom of action. President Obama was right to flag this to incoming President Trump as the greatest near-term challenge to US security, just as President Trump is correct to declare the era of strategic patience over.

But with these great risks runs the opportunity to solve the North Korean problem once and for all. We have tried one way for twenty-five years with little to show in ending today's dangerous trajectory. The problem is much worse today, and accelerating in consequence at a rapid pace. Given the stakes, it is time to consider a new approach—even ideas once considered unthinkable.

Yet the stakes are so high for US and allied security that the Trump administration must have a cogent, extremely well-executed approach if we are to have the chance for some success. Bellicosity has its place, but ending strategic patience without an alternative course of action risks certain failure and great loss.

Todd M. Rosenblum was a delegate to the US-China-South Korea-North Korea Four Party Peace Talks in the 1990s. He was a senior official at the Departments of Defense and Homeland Security for the Obama administration from 2009-2015. He is a Nonresident Fellow at The Atlantic Council and serves on the Defense Science Board Task Force on Homeland Defense.

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