



THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND A NUCLEAR-ARMED NORTH KOREA: TIME FOR A NEW APPROACH

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WELCOME TO THE JOB, MR. PRESIDENT

Without question, a nuclear-armed and belligerent North Korea will present the incoming Trump administration with its most urgent, dangerous, and potentially explosive problem. Dealing with the rising threat of North Korea will test the new president's leadership, his ability to manage ties with longtime East Asian allies and partners, and his skill at maintaining peace and stability in this all-important region.

As the new president has heard directly from President Obama and in intelligence briefings, North Korea has nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems that already threaten South Korea and Japan, as well as U.S. bases in those countries and in the Western Pacific. He has been warned that it will not be long before Pyongyang's nuclear-armed missiles can reach the United States homeland.

He has been briefed that North Korea is rapidly expanding its nuclear arsenal and developing new missiles, thereby giving itself the means to carry out its threats to use nuclear weapons against the U.S. and others.

North Korean officials tell their American interlocutors that their nuclear weapons have the United States "deterred." They have convinced themselves that this now opens the way for the realization of Pyongyang's longtime goal: the end of the U.S.-South Korea alliance and national reunification on North Korea's terms.

Through its nuclear buildup and threats to use those weapons, Pyongyang's blunt message to the United States has become disturbingly clear: "We are willing to risk nuclear war to achieve our goals. Are you?"



Four U.S. administrations have tried to stop North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. Over two-and-a-half decades, Pyongyang was offered incentives, presidential assurances, and security guarantees to convince it to give up its nuclear program. When these approaches proved ineffective, Washington tried sanctions, threats, and isolation. And eventually every U.S. administration also tried a mix of the two approaches.

Nothing worked more than temporarily. As a result, each American president has bequeathed to his successor a more dangerous North Korean challenge than the one he inherited. And it is now Donald Trump's turn to contend with the nightmare of a nuclear-armed North Korea.

PYONGYANG'S GAMEPLAN

Many experts used to think that Pyongyang was building nuclear weapons as “bargaining chips.” In this view, a transaction-minded North Korea hoped to extort aid and concessions from the international community, using its nuclear weapons as trading bait.

However, the experience of thousands of hours of tough negotiations over many years eventually demonstrated that incentives were of little interest to North Korea. Pyongyang proved unimpressed with the prospect of diplomatic normalization, economic aid, energy assistance, and becoming a “normal” member of the international community. The failure of these efforts showed Pyongyang's determination to develop and keep its nuclear weapons. North Korea was not building nuclear weapons just to trade them away.

Thanks to this bitter but revealing experience, today we have a clearer picture of the role of nuclear weapons in Pyongyang's strategy.

In the mind of the North Korean regime, nuclear weapons ensure the regime's survival. Pyongyang's lesson from the fall of Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi is that their failure to develop nuclear weapons left them defenseless against the United States and this situation brought about the end of their regimes.

Pyongyang has long believed that the United States would not dare attack a country that has nuclear weapons and is prepared to use them; hence North Korea's determination to build nuclear weapons and threaten their use.



But there is a second role for nuclear weapons.

North Korea believes its nuclear weapons have fundamentally changed the security balance on the Korean Peninsula. In this view, the United States must now live with a nuclear-armed North Korea and accept Pyongyang's demands both to negotiate a peace treaty to replace the Korean War Armistice Agreement and to conduct U.S.-DPRK "arms control talks."

In these proposed talks, Pyongyang's representatives tell us, the United States would agree to remove its "threat" against North Korea by ending its alliance with South Korea, withdrawing American troops from the peninsula, and removing the U.S. extended deterrent or "nuclear umbrella" that protects its South Korean and Japanese allies. North Korea's leader believes this would open the way for the North to achieve its ultimate goal: the reunification of the peninsula on its terms.

U.S. POLICY OPTIONS

Faced with a rising nuclear threat from North Korea, as well as a regime bent on using its nuclear capabilities to blackmail and threaten its neighbors and target the United States, what can the U.S. do?

The Trump administration will arrive in office facing a list of options that are deeply unsatisfying. The options are a mixture of deficient, dangerous, defeatist, and even delusional ideas. Let's look at each of them:

"Staying the course"

One option would be to pursue a version of recent policy, which relied on the cumulative effect of sanctions over time to convince Pyongyang to resume denuclearization talks. Sanctions were gradually ratcheted up, usually in response to a North Korean nuclear or missile test, in a tit-for-tat manner, with the hope that North Korea would eventually yield to pressure.

This approach did not work, and during the Obama administration North Korea conducted four nuclear tests and made significant strides in missile development, despite increased pressure from the United States. Today, with Pyongyang's nuclear and missile threats becoming increasingly urgent, a gradualist approach seems doomed to failure.



Military action

Some have argued that the United States and South Korea could take military action against North Korea.

It seems certain that an allied attack on North Korea would destroy much of its nuclear and missile infrastructure, leave the regime incapable of mounting a significant conventional counterattack, and render its army largely ineffective as a fighting force.

But North Korea could still inflict major damage on South Korea. And even a broadly successful air campaign against the North could not guarantee that North Korea would not use its nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction against the ROK, Japan, and U.S. bases.

Military action is a dangerous option that could undermine regional stability, risk a conflict with China, create peninsula-wide chaos, and cause major damage to our ROK ally.

Living with a nuclear North Korea

Others declare that years of U.S. policy have failed and that the U.S. now has no choice but to accept a nuclear-armed DPRK and rely on containment and deterrence to “manage” the threat.

Doing this would reverse decades of U.S. policy. It would damage, perhaps fatally, the international nuclear non-proliferation regime and emasculate the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT).

Such a move would shake the confidence of our South Korean and Japanese allies, who refuse to accept Pyongyang’s nuclear status. Calls would certainly escalate in both Seoul and Tokyo to develop their own nuclear weapons.

Accepting the permanence of North Korea’s nuclear weapons would allow Pyongyang to continue to enhance its nuclear and missile arsenals. And Pyongyang’s temptation to engage in proliferation would be strong, especially since the fabric of the NPT would be damaged and American resolve would be questionable.



A new goal for dialogue?

What about accepting Pyongyang's proposal to discuss replacement of the Korean War Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty, instead of, or in advance of, a denuclearization discussion?

The argument for such an approach is that a peace treaty would defuse tensions, convey U.S. seriousness about dealing with Pyongyang's concerns, and remove what Pyongyang has long claimed is the "root cause" of its development of nuclear weapons—American "hostility."

Such thinking is delusional. Accepting North Korea's proposal would seriously damage ties with the ROK, which is not prepared to negotiate a peace treaty with a nuclear-armed DPRK. And Seoul would surely not accept a peace treaty discussion in which it is not a central player, especially since Pyongyang's peace treaty proposal gives South Korea no role or seat at the negotiating table.

Entering a peace treaty discussion with a nuclear North Korea and foregoing denuclearization discussions would buy into the North Korean game plan mentioned earlier. North Korea wants a peace treaty that leads to the end of the U.S.-ROK alliance. The Trump administration must not accept this.

A "freeze"

For some, the failure to end North Korea's nuclear program means that we should now seek a more modest goal of "freezing" or "capping" the North Korean nuclear program and trying to eliminate it over time through dialogue.

It's important to recall that a freeze leading to denuclearization was the central premise of two previous denuclearization agreements North Korea—the October 1994 Agreed Framework and the September 2005 Six-Party agreement. Both efforts failed.

A credible freeze or cap on the North's nuclear program would only be as good as our ability to verify it, and North Korea has declared that it will not accept international verification. Regarding this point, it is important to remember that the 2005 denuclearization accord ultimately broke down during the Bush administration because of the North's objection to intrusive verification. If anything, North Korea's position on verification has hardened since then.



Lack of verification would leave North Korea's uranium enrichment facilities in operation. Pyongyang would be free to improve its warheads, manufacture larger warheads, and make other refinements to its nuclear weapons during a so-called "freeze." And a freeze that does not halt the testing and deployment of ballistic missiles would allow Pyongyang to continue to improve its delivery systems.

If the goal of a freeze is to prevent the North from making additional nuclear weapons, it will not work.

Unless a *temporary* freeze on nuclear testing and plutonium production—things we *can* monitor—is part of a *firm* agreement that leads quickly to complete and verifiable denuclearization, it runs the risk of creating the illusion of security and progress where none exists.

"Nukes for everybody"

Finally, some have suggested that the solution is to allow Japan and South Korea to develop their own nuclear weapons to defend themselves and deter North Korea. This approach is ill-advised and dangerous, as it would lead to the further deterioration of the NPT and provide justification for Pyongyang to keep its nuclear weapons.

When a resident is threatening to blow up the neighborhood, responding to the threat by giving everyone in the neighborhood a can of gasoline and a pack of matches is unlikely to be an effective approach.

IS THIS CHINA'S PROBLEM?

Many believe that Beijing is the key to solving the North Korea nuclear challenge. The reality is that China is increasingly part of the problem.

Barring a turnabout in China's position, we have probably reached the limits of Beijing's willingness to do more to pressure the DPRK. Chinese cooperation in implementing international sanctions has been grudging and filled with loopholes. A willingness to look the other way by local officials in China's northeast provinces has allowed goods, including sensitive items, to continue to flow into North Korea, and enabled DPRK firms to operate on Chinese territory.



Efforts to approve a new and tougher UN Security Council resolution after Pyongyang's fifth nuclear test in September 2016 were fraught with difficulties because of Chinese reluctance to increase pressure on Pyongyang. It remains to be seen to what degree China will actually enforce the new resolution, which was adopted only after 82 days of wrangling and delay.

China's position on North Korea is increasingly driven by geopolitical factors, especially Beijing's strategic rivalry with the United States. With the U.S. and the PRC at loggerheads over freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, China's PLA challenging America's Japanese ally over the Senkakus, Taiwan again becoming a contentious issue in U.S.-China relations, and with China determined to supplant the United States as the dominant regional power, China's leaders do not see North Korea as a liability. And Beijing is hardly keen to grant the United States a "favor" by helping in Korea when it sees the United States challenging it elsewhere in the region.

Meanwhile, despite their opposition in principle to a nuclear-armed North Korea, the PRC's leaders continue to believe it is better to keep a troublesome, nuclear-armed North Korean ally afloat than to risk the chaos that might result if the regime collapses.

Accordingly, the United States should be modest in its expectations of China when it comes to pressuring Pyongyang. Washington should also avoid characterizing North Korea as "China's problem." Pyongyang's nuclear weapons are aimed at U.S. bases and U.S. allies, and soon will target the United States itself. For that reason alone, subcontracting America's security to a Beijing that is inclined to sympathize with Pyongyang would be a grave mistake.

So when Beijing repeats the familiar mantra that it has "little influence" over North Korea, U.S. policymakers should respond that China's inability (or unwillingness) to act makes it necessary for the U.S. and its allies to do so as a matter of self-defense.

But the new administration should also recognize that the steps it may take to intensify sanctions on Pyongyang, including targeting (as we should) Chinese companies that violate international sanctions, could complicate U.S.-China relations. But this potential outcome must not be allowed to prevent the United States from defending its interests.



TIME FOR A DIFFERENT APPROACH

To contend with a nuclear-armed and dangerous North Korea, the United States needs an approach that reflects the urgency of the threat. The United States must apply immediate and unprecedented pressure on the North Korean regime to compel it to change course.

Going forward, U.S. policy should be built on a stronger foundation than exists today, one that includes:

- Improved U.S. and allied military capabilities that would be deployed on and around the Korean Peninsula;
- Enhanced extended deterrence and measures to physically demonstrate U.S. determination to fulfill its commitments; and
- Increased scope and frequency of military exercises, to include participation by other members of the United Nations Command, such as the United Kingdom and Australia.

It is essential that North Korea be convinced that it will never be accepted as a nuclear state and that the United States will make the cost of Pyongyang's pursuit of nuclear weapons unacceptable.

U.S. policy should make clear that Washington's preference is to resume meaningful dialogue with Pyongyang, and that the United States stands by past agreements to eventually normalize relations with a *non-nuclear* DPRK.

Washington should assure Pyongyang that it is prepared to engage at the highest levels with the DPRK to address the full range of its concerns, *if and only if* Pyongyang is prepared to reopen a serious denuclearization dialogue.

MAKING PYONGYANG'S CHOICE CLEAR

In order to do this, the United States should put at risk the one thing that the DPRK holds more dear than its nuclear weapons—the existence of its regime—in order to convince Pyongyang to end its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

North Korean officials say their goal is to maintain their regime. They believe nuclear weapons will help them achieve this. The U.S. must convince Pyongyang otherwise.



THE TOOLKIT

This can be done through greatly strengthened economic, trade, financial, and other measures designed to starve the Pyongyang regime of hard currency, disrupt its commerce, and hinder its ability to violate international sanctions.

Sanctions on North Korea should be intensified to the level once applied on Iran. This should be done as quickly as possible to achieve maximum effect. Gradualism only allows Pyongyang the time and space to find a way around sanctions.

The United States and like-minded countries should expel North Korea from the international banking system, including the global financial transaction clearing system.

Secondary sanctions should be applied on third-country entities, including Chinese firms, doing business with suspect North Korean entities. Travel and tourism companies currently doing business with North Korea should be shut down.

The international community should intensify inspection and interdiction of suspect vessels and aircraft trading with the DPRK. The U.S. should consider imposing a naval quarantine to prevent North Korea from violating existing UN sanctions.

North Korean assets should be seized if they are linked to illicit activities or violation of UN sanctions. Overseas DPRK trading offices should be shut down when they violate sanctions. The United States should encourage the international community to stop trading with North Korea and be prepared to exclude from the United States market firms that do business with North Korea.

We should encourage overseas representatives of the DPRK to defect and to cooperate with international law enforcement to stop activities. We should consider covert actions to exploit vulnerabilities in the DPRK's communications, banking, and financial systems—but the less said publicly about these measures, the better.

RISK AND UNCERTAINTY

The above recommendations carry some risk. But allowing North Korea to increase its nuclear threat is riskier.

No country knows the risks better than the Republic of Korea. Importantly, Seoul's message to Washington over the past year has consistently been one of determination and willingness to accept the risks.



But South Korea's political crisis has raised questions about its ability to stay the course. And we cannot rule out that a new South Korean government might opt for a different approach to deal with Pyongyang. This bears careful watching.

Going forward, the new U.S. administration must carefully consider South Korea's concerns, sensitivities and politics. As the Trump administration works with Seoul to coordinate next steps against North Korea, it must not alienate our Korean ally, or take it for granted. Washington should also avoid fueling South Korean fears that America might abandon its ally.

As the United States faces the rising danger of a nuclear-armed North Korea, it will need partners. So the new administration must build the closest possible ties of trust and confidence with its allies, particularly the Republic of Korea, which has always stood shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States. Therein lies the best hope for success in dealing with North Korea.



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During 2010-2011 he taught at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. From 2007 to 2010 he was President/CEO of The Korea Society, where he organized the historic 2008 concert in Pyongyang by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra.

In 2007, he retired after a long career in government service, most of that as an American diplomat and one of the State Department's top Asia experts. His diplomatic career included service as the Acting Assistant Secretary and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. During his career, he served in the U.S. Embassies in Beijing, Seoul, Tokyo, and Wellington and was the director of the State Department's offices managing relations with Korea and with Japan.



He won numerous awards as a U.S. diplomat and helped lead the State Department's highly praised response to the December 2004 tsunami disaster in Indonesia. His last State Department assignment was as Cyrus Vance Fellow in Diplomatic Studies at the Council on Foreign Relations, where he directed a task force on U.S.-China relations. He has extensive experience in negotiations with North Korea and served as deputy chief of the U.S. team negotiating with the DPRK and as the U.S. government's primary day-to-day liaison with North Korea.

He is fluent in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, and is a graduate of Princeton University, a veteran of the U.S. Air Force, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.