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## **The North Korean Threat: War, Deterrence and Diplomacy**



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If **war breaks out** in Korea over the next few weeks or months, no one would or should be surprised. That is a fair definition of a crisis situation, and that is what we have now.

Crises in international affairs typically have underlying causes linked to deep differences of some kind, be they religious, ethnic, territorial, systemic or structural—as an international political theorist might say—or some combination of these. They are the “pre-existing conditions,” on top of which comes some incident to ignite the fire, making for the urgency of crisis. In recent decades, think of India and Pakistan—the Hindu-Muslim divide and incidents in the disputed geography of Kashmir. Think of the Arab-Israeli conflict, Islam and Judaism, and the status of Jerusalem and Palestinian territory on the West Bank. Think of Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia in the Balkans, Greece and Turkey in Cyprus, or even of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War that erupted into crisis over missiles in Cuba.

Now consider the United States and North Korea. What is the pre-existing condition? It is not religious. If it is territorial, going back to 1950 and the North's attempt to alter the manufactured division of the peninsula, it has not been seriously contested for a very long time, and neither side admits to this as the outstanding issue today. And while our political and economic systems are quite different, coexistence would seem to be easily attainable. Indeed, America's secretary of state recently sought to reassure the North by saying, essentially, that the United States had no need to change the government in the North, almost assuring the DPRK that our abhorrence of their totalitarian government and human rights practices need not be an obstacle to peaceful relations.

No, the pre-existing condition, from the American perspective, seems to be the development of nuclear weapons by the North and, because of those weapons, ballistic missiles too. That is what focused the minds of the “Principals” in the U.S. government in 1994 during the first North Korean nuclear crisis, not the North's belligerent rhetoric, its system of government, its provocations or even its artillery arrayed along the DMZ. As then Secretary of

Defense Bill Perry said in a key Principals Meeting at the time, "We've lived with all that for a very long while. What we need to do now is to stop their program to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons." And we did—for a decade.

But North Korea ultimately got nuclear weapons, testing them five times over the administrations of Presidents Bush and Obama. Over the same period they ultimately attained medium and intermediate range ballistic missiles so that they could deliver those weapons against targets in the western Pacific Ocean, including Japan, South Korea, and U.S. territories and assets in that region.

It is instructive to note that North Korean success with nuclear weapons and ballistic missile development did not immediately spark a crisis. Successive administrations in Washington condemned the North's progress, sought and got sanctions from Congress and the United Nations, but did not suggest that preventive war was on the agenda. The United States was content, and our allies in Seoul and Tokyo too—but presumably somewhat less so—with the extension of the American deterrent to address the vulnerability of the Republic of Korea and Japan to the growing North Korean nuclear weapons and ballistic missile capability. Yes, the United States maintains a multilayered ballistic missile defense in Northeast Asia, but it is not "leak proof" against a determined foe with a stockpile of missiles. And leakage is a very bad thing when dealing with nuclear weapons. So U.S. allies have lived with no real defense against North Korean ballistic missiles, relying instead on deterrence extended by the United States to meet their need for security.

### The Second North Korean Nuclear Crisis

The spark that threatens to ignite the dry kindling of the North Korean situation, and thus creates the current crisis, is the emergence of ICBM capability which the North intends to mate with nuclear weapons. Doing so would make the continental United States vulnerable to attack by the DPRK. True, the United States has been developing a ballistic missile defense for the homeland, but it is not now, nor will it be anytime soon, ready for prime time. That leaves the United States depending on deterrence—the threat of a punishing retaliatory strike—for its security, just as our allies have been relying upon our extended deterrent for their security, for more than a decade. This, the president has indicated via tweets and other means of communication, is unacceptable for the United States.

To be fair though, it is not as if the United States simply has a higher standard for its security than the one it has been prepared to settle for to meet allied needs. After all, the credibility of extended deterrence has long been understood to be put at risk by the vulnerability of the guarantor—in this case, the United States—and so North Korean ICBMs also newly threaten American allies by virtue of their threat to America. The deterrent calculation often used to capture the situation goes to Washington's willingness to put an American city at risk to protect an ally—to trade San Francisco for Seoul, one might say.

The credibility of the deterrent threat then is one element in the calculation of the effectiveness of deterrence. Other factors are the risk propensities and level of damage that the object of deterrence is prepared to accept. Is the leadership in North Korea, for example, suicidal? Note that the question is not whether or not the DPRK is led by some who are homicidal or even irrational in some matters, but whether or not survival of the nation, the regime and perhaps themselves are valued enough to discourage an attack which would provoke devastating retaliation.

While the relevance of all this to the DPRK is new for the United States and its allies, it is not new for the United States in the case with other countries and other allies. The United States has been vulnerable to Soviet, and eventually Russian, ICBMs for fifty years or so, and to Chinese ICBMs for almost as long. The United States has depended upon deterrence rather than defense to meet its security needs against threats from these countries—threats that were and are orders of magnitude greater than any that might be posed by North Korea for decades to come. And America did this while assuring its allies in Europe and Asia that U.S. vulnerability would not undermine its commitment to their security—that is, it maintained the credibility of its extended deterrence. This has been the U.S. posture for itself and its allies, notwithstanding concerns about the rationality and risk propensities of the leadership in the Soviet Union and China, particularly in the darkest days of the Cold War.

So if we ask why there is a crisis now, it is because the United States has defined it as such. It has not manufactured a crisis: it is the North that aims to change the "facts on the ground." But it is the United States that is defining the meaning and impact of those facts. In addition to defining the current North Korean nuclear crisis, the United States is also defining the "solution space" for policy response. It is ruling out some past approaches to challenges from the North and ruling in others.

Negotiation, for example, has been likened to submission to blackmail and appeasement. It has been termed a failed policy, pursued out of naivety by those duped by the North. The North is said to have cheated on the deals, which have cost billions of dollars without any positive results. Most recently, we learned that the DPRK "understands only one thing," and therefore pursuing talks is a waste of time.

And while at times it has sounded like U.S. leadership was, therefore, considering a preventive military strike to end the emerging threat to the continental United States, other voices coming out of Washington have warned that there is no good military option either, that Seoul is held hostage by North Korean artillery deployed in caves along the DMZ, and that both Seoul and Tokyo are now hostage to the North's ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons.

When, in the past, neither negotiations nor military action was judged desirable, the United States fell back on some version of containment. But this is now regarded as inadequate too, since containment will not contain the North's emerging ICBM capability and prevent American vulnerability.

The favored option now appears to be much tougher bilateral and international sanctions, enhanced by China's active participation in their implementation. Depending on the advocate, this will stop the North's ability to pursue its weapons programs, or bring the regime to its knees or the negotiating table, or cause the collapse of the regime.

One might ask, "What's wrong with this picture?" The answer is that there is, in fact, a great deal wrong with the way the United States has defined the current challenge from North Korea and the options for meeting it.

First, there is the matter of the military situation, specifically the balance between the DPRK and the United States. It is actually extremely asymmetric, grossly favoring the United States in terms of conventional and nuclear forces on land, in the air and at sea. It is not the United States that has no good military option, it is North Korea. Yes, the North is credible with a threat to use whatever nuclear capability it has were the United States to threaten the survival of its regime. But short of that, the North should not be able to intimidate the United States or its allies with its nuclear weapons, ICBMs or no ICBMs. The idea of the North holding Seoul or Tokyo hostage is credible only if the leadership in the North is assessed as suicidal. There is no evidence for that judgment. The North Koreans have watched the U.S. military in action in the Middle East, as they never tire of pointing out, and they are acutely aware of the unique American capability to project force with precision and lethality almost anywhere on the globe. The nature of the military balance between the two countries is not lost on them.

That, of course, does not mean that we should ignore the growing nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities in North Korea.

But it does mean that the United States does not have to launch a preventive war to block North Korean acquisition of nuclear armed ICBMs. That capability will not give the DPRK the ability to blackmail the United States anymore than it did the Soviet Union during the Cold War, likewise with Russia or China today.

It does mean that there is no reason to embrace self-deterrence or a posture of military disadvantage, and that we can approach negotiations from a position of confidence. And we should, in fact, seek negotiations.

Now, the arguments against negotiations seem to turn on the assumption of “bad faith” on the North Korean side. The assumption of critics, for example, is that the North will seek to use intimidation and fear to extract concessions, that it will stall in talks while advancing its weapons programs, that it will renege on whatever agreements it does make, or otherwise cheat on them even as it extracts benefits of all kinds.

But to argue the virtue of North Koreans in all negotiations is simply “too heavy a lift” and completely unnecessary. It would make more sense to first agree on the standard for assessing the value of a negotiation and its outcome, and then ask if any negotiations with North Korea have been successful by that standard. I would then propose that if a negotiation enhances the security of the United States and its allies in the region, that if we are all better off with whatever deal is struck than without it, then the negotiating track was a prudent one.

By that standard, the deal struck in 1994, the Agreed Framework, was a good one. Absent the deal, the American intelligence community assessed in the early nineties that, if the North completed the graphite moderated reactors then under construction, it could produce roughly 200 kg of plutonium each year, and plausibly have one hundred nuclear weapons by the year 2000. As it turned out, after the deal, those reactors were not completed, no more plutonium was produced or separated in North Korea for a decade, and when George W. Bush entered the White House in 2001 he found North Korea, as best we know, without any nuclear weapons.

Now, if an American is asked if the North cheated on the deal, he would say that they surely did by secretly acquiring gas centrifuge equipment and technology from Pakistan. But from the North Korean perspective, Washington had failed to normalize relations with Pyongyang and eventually labeled it a point on the axis of evil, making the pursuit of fissile material by uranium enrichment, as well as separation of plutonium, a reasonable response. Whichever narrative one finds more attractive, it is the outcome that deserves attention when assessing the value of negotiation in this case, and I would argue that the Agreed Framework was a good deal for the United States and its allies. (I say this without any pretension to objectivity on the matter, in light of my own role in those negotiations.)

The truth here is that the quality of a negotiation, and any deal that emerges, should be judged by its terms, what both sides get and give and particularly on the issue of cheating. The question here is whether the terms of an agreement provide for sufficient transparency to monitor it—providing reasonable confidence that significant noncompliance will be discovered in a timely manner. It has been unfortunate, and potentially tragic, that negotiations as a tool have been so disparaged by bumper sticker-like assertions without any reasoned analysis to support them.

Continuing to address options, a word ought to be said about containment, or “strategic patience” as some would prefer. Basically, there really is no reason to abandon containment as a default option if the situation cannot be otherwise addressed. While it is true that containment will not, by itself, “contain” the North Korean weapons programs, it can contain their threat. If containment is understood, as it should be, to require attention to defense, meaning conventional forces and development and deployment of BMD as may be technically feasible, the maintenance of credible nuclear deterrent forces, and the cultivation of the political as well as the military elements of alliances, then it is an appealing option—at least until a better alternative becomes available. Disparaging this option is no more helpful than disparaging the others.

Finally, a comment is due on the currently favored option of imposing more severe sanctions on North Korea, the impact of which is enhanced by gaining China’s active participation. There may be nothing wrong with imposing sanctions on the DPRK for its withdrawal from the Non Proliferation Treaty, development and testing of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons, development and testing of extended range ballistic missiles and for its human rights abuses. But we should not delude ourselves about what may be accomplished through sanctions. They will not directly stop North Korean weapons programs by interdicting needed equipment: too much of what these programs require has already been acquired, and the North is too skilled at selective circumvention. They will not cause the regime to collapse: the North Korean people are accustomed to hardship and besides, Beijing will not allow that to happen. China does not wish to be confronted with a unified peninsula under a government in Seoul allied with the United States. But sanctions, particularly those more recently imposed, will cause substantial hardship in the North, and plausibly make the government more interested in negotiations as a way to relieve pressure. This is what most observers believe paved the way for the ultimately successful negotiations with Iran. But the endgame would not be sanctions: it would be negotiations.

## Negotiations

We have a pretty good idea what the DPRK would want from negotiations, and they probably know what we want the most. Fundamentally, the North wants America to stop acts of hostility against it and to be free of the threat of regime change. This means that they want an end to sanctions and provocative U.S.-ROK military exercises, particularly those involving practiced decapitation and American flights of strategic bombers over the peninsula. They want to be respected and accepted as a nuclear weapons state— consider India’s status for the last decade—and generally have normalized relations with the United States.

Some analysts also assert that the North is not a status quo power, that it still harbors hopes of unifying the peninsula by the use of force and, in fact, seeks ICBMs to deter the U.S. from meeting its alliance responsibilities with regard to the defense of the ROK. These assertions should not be dismissed, nor should they be assumed to be accurate. They should be tested through a process of engagement and negotiations, during the course of which we should leave no doubt in North Korean minds about the strength of the U.S.-ROK alliance and the intent of both parties to honor their obligations under it.

From the American perspective, it is exactly the ballistic missile and nuclear weapons programs, which the North so values, that need to be dismantled. Indeed, some of us believe that a nuclear weapons free peninsula is an essential goal of any negotiation with the North, and to fall off this goal would legitimize the DPRK as a nuclear weapons state. Those who see this disagreement as an impossible barrier to a successful outcome should understand that the most difficult goals in a negotiation may be approached incrementally, over time, as both sides gain from the agreement and gain confidence in the process of negotiation. It is not hard to imagine limits on testing of ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons, in exchange for some limits on ROK-U.S. military exercises, as an initial step.

While the United States has at various times put aside concerns about North Korean internal affairs, including its human rights abuses, it is becoming clear that normalization of relations is unlikely to succeed absent some revision in its human rights practices. Again, this may be accomplished incrementally and linked to movement on the American side. Sanctions relief and the negotiation of a peace treaty to replace the armistice should be within the realm of the imaginable.

To deal effectively with North Korea, the ROK, Japan and the United States must have the demonstrable capability to mount an overwhelming defense in the event of a conflict. Likewise, the United States must leave no doubt about deterrence and its capability and intent to retaliate in response to a strike against its territory or that of its allies. The United States should be willing to use diplomacy to engage in negotiations so long as there is the possibility of eventually achieving a nuclear weapons free peninsula, and the ROK, Japan and the United States should continue to invest in and cultivate their alliances as the best way to guarantee the peace in northeast Asia.

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*Image: Reuters*

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