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We Are Teetering on the Edge of a Hinge Point With North Korea

Washington’s appetite for a deal with Pyongyang seems to be diminishing.

August 5, 2019 [Siegfried S. Hecker](#), [Robert L. Carlin](#)

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South Koreans walk past replicas of a North Korean Scud-B missile and South Korean Nike missile at the Korean War Memorial on Feb. 28, 2019 in Seoul, South Korea. (Chung Sung-Jun/Getty)

It is a hair-raising fact that since 2001, North Korea has gone from zero nuclear weapons to an arsenal that is likely between 30 and 60. The common wisdom is that the efforts by the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations to halt the North’s nuclear program through diplomacy or sanctions were circumvented by the North’s repeated violations of diplomatic agreements. There is another way of looking at the problem, however, and that is what we have described in a [study](#) as “hinge points” — moments when bad decisions had bad consequences for U.S. national security. We are teetering on the edge of another such hinge point, perhaps the most serious yet. For that reason, it’s well worth looking more closely at what is at risk, how not to repeat previous flawed decisions and what a path through this perilous moment might look like.

By any measure, the U.S.-North Korea summit in Hanoi in February failed. For a month or so afterward, it looked as if that failure could lead to decisions on both sides that would reignite the tensions of 2017 when the North tested what was likely a hydrogen bomb and several intercontinental-range missiles and President Trump threatened North Korea with “[fire and fury](#).” The clear danger following Hanoi was that by resuming testing, the North could perfect its ability to mate a nuclear warhead (in the worst case, an H-bomb) to an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of hitting the continental U.S.

In other words, Hanoi is not old news, receding in the rearview mirror. The potential for very negative consequences from the missteps at that meeting is still with us. As has happened several times over the past two decades, it remains possible that the U.S., having inadequately assessed the risks and benefits of accepting a less-than-perfect step with the North, could end up with North Korea possessing an even more menacing nuclear arsenal. The glib mantra quickly shared by both political parties in Washington after the summit — “[a bad deal is better than no deal](#)” — has served only to rationalize a bad decision.

Hinge points are not necessarily door-slamming moments. History shows there is usually an opportunity to recover. Until now, the tragedy has been that recovery meant admitting a mistake, and few governments are willing to do so. There are tentative signs that this time could be different. For a variety of reasons, neither Washington nor Pyongyang seem to want the negative outcome of Hanoi to be permanent, and both appear looking for ways to recover. The meeting between President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Panmunjom on June 30 — almost breathtaking in how it came together in a matter of a few days — looked to be a reflection of a shared search for recovery. That was hopeful but by itself clearly wasn’t going to move things where they need to be. It remains for both sides to reevaluate previous calculations and unambiguously signal a new approach through actions as well as words.

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The burden here falls on both sides. Perhaps the most fateful of the previous hinge points occurred in October 2002, when the Bush administration dealt a fatal blow to the 1994 Agreed Framework rather than work to correct its deficiencies. At that time, the North had [no nuclear weapons](#) and less than a few kilograms of plutonium, its plutonium production was frozen, it probably had no highly enriched uranium and only a fledging centrifuge program, and it was in its fourth year of a unilaterally declared missile launch moratorium, which limited its ability to expand the range and sophistication of its missiles. Washington’s excuse for walking away from the Agreed Framework was that Pyongyang was violating the agreement by clandestinely pursuing uranium enrichment.

Almost immediately, the U.S. paid a tremendous price. The North restarted its plutonium production facilities, built the bomb and accelerated its uranium centrifuge program. In effect, Washington had focused on a risk (uranium enrichment) that would take a decade to become a real threat instead of dealing with the much more dangerous threat of a plutonium bomb that took only a few years to develop and dramatically demonstrate with a nuclear test. Now, in fact, the U.S. faces both threats.

North Korea Nuclear Program – Hecker, Carlin, Serbin (Stanford University)
 3 shades of green (dark best), 3 shades of red (dark worst)

Year	US Diplomacy	DPRK Diplomacy	Yongbyong Presence	Plutonium	Uranium enrichment	Tritium/Li6	Weaponize Design/build/test	Nukes (Summary)	Missiles
1992 Bush I	G1	G1	G1	G2	G1	G1	R1	R1	R1
1993 Clinton	G2	G2					R1	R1	R1
1994	G3	G3					R1	R1	R1
1995	G3	G3					R1	G3	R1
1996	G3	G3	G3	G3	G1	G1	R1	G3	R1
1997	G2	G2	G3	G3	R1	G1	R1	G3	R1
1998	G2	G2	G3	G3	R1	G1	R1	G3	R1
1999	G3	G3	G3	G3	R1	G1	R1	G3	G1
2000	G3	G3	G3	G3	R1	G1	R1	G3	G1
2001 Bush II	R2	G2	G3	G3	R1	G1	R1	G3	G1
2002	R3	G2	G3	G3	R1	G1	R1	G3	G1
2003	R2	R2	R3	R3	R1	R1	R2	R2	G1
2004	R2	R1	R3	R3	R1	R1	R2	R2	G1
2005	R1	R1	R3	R3	R1	R1	R2	R2	R1
2006	R1	R2	R3	R3	R1	R1	R2	R2	R1
2007	G2	G1	G3	G1	R1	R1	R1	R1	R1
2008	G2	G1	G3	G1	R1	R1	R1	R1	R1
2009 Obama	R1	R1	R3	R3	R1	R1	R2	R2	R1
2010	G1	R1	R3	R1	R2	R2	R2	R2	R1
2011	G1	G1	R3	R1	R2	R2	R2	R2	R1
2012	R1	R1	R3	R1	R2	R2	R2	R2	R1
2013	R2	R1	R3	R2	R2	R2	R2	R2	R1
2014	R2	R1	R3	R2	R3	R3	R2	R2	R1
2015	R1	G1	R3	R3	R3	R3	R2	R2	R2
2016	R1	R3	R3	R3	R3	R3	R3	R3	R2
2017 Trump	R3	R3	R3	R3	R3	R3	R3	R3	R3

U.S. decisions result in hinge points. Bad decisions have bad consequences.

Over the ensuing 15 years, there were other hinge points that led to increasingly bad consequences. In February 2012, as Kim Jong-un took over from his father who had died two months before, Pyongyang and Washington struck a deal to stop nuclear and missile testing and suspend Yongbyon operations as well as allow international inspectors back into the facilities. The details were not well nailed down, however, and the poorly consummated “Leap Day Deal” collapsed when the North attempted another satellite launch in April as part of the celebrations of Kim Il-sung’s centennial.

Pyongyang [claimed](#) it had never agreed to halt satellite launches. Rather than try to salvage the other parts of the deal — primarily focused on the nuclear program — the Obama administration walked away and orchestrated United Nations Security Council sanctions. The North responded with its third nuclear test. It then expanded its uranium centrifuge operations and restarted its plutonium production reactor, which gave it more plutonium for its bomb program along with tritium, a requisite for hydrogen bombs.

Again in 2015, Washington [passed up](#) possible steps to limit the North’s nuclear program. During the next three years, the North conducted three more nuclear tests, including a likely hydrogen bomb with a yield exceeding 200 kilotons. It also conducted an unprecedented number and different types of missile launches, including three intercontinental ballistic missile-capable test flights. That’s where we sit today.

As much as Washington, Pyongyang also often misjudges timing, missing what are real but only fleeting windows of opportunity. The most obvious example was in 2000 when the North waited too long to send a senior official to Washington to follow up on major Clinton administration efforts to develop the scope and pace of the negotiations.

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Today, there is a window of opportunity, but it may be quickly closing. Pyongyang seems once again to be miscalculating timing. Washington’s appetite for and interest in a deal seems to be diminishing the longer the North Koreans put off reengaging. While understandable, ennui — whatever the cause — is not an especially good reason for fateful national security decisions.

It is going to take both sides to recognize the importance of the moment. On the U.S. side, that means not just the negotiators or the administration but also the broader foreign policy establishment and the political forces that will help shape the environment in which a far-reaching agreement will either be sustained or wither on the vine. It would be folly to prescribe the specific steps that will constitute a deal or even the first steps in a deal. However, there are broad outlines, at least on the U.S. side, to consider.

At Hanoi, the U.S. passed over the complete shuttering of the North’s Yongbyon nuclear complex as insufficient. The question is, compared to what? If the real choice is Yongbyon or Yongbyon plus something additional, that would be one thing. But if the choice turns out to be Yongbyon or nothing — that’s another hinge point, particularly since the North’s [recent missile launches](#) and Kim’s unveiling of [new submarine construction](#) shows that he has more options for an unfettered continuation of his nuclear program. Washington has made the wrong choice several times over the past 20 years. It cannot afford to do so again.