

# Diplomacy in the Land of No Good Options

## Assessing North Korea's Nuclear Doctrine and the Prospects for Denuclearization

Prepared for the Jamestown Foundation by

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## **The Jamestown Foundation**

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# Executive Summary

It is late in 2018, a year that has been characterized by twists and turns in the U.S.-North Korean relationship. It may prove to be a pivotal year in the 70-year history of this tortured relationship. Or, as many pundits predict, it may turn out to be another journey down a rabbit hole that eventually returns us to the status quo. The fundamental question is whether North Korea is prepared to give up its nuclear program and whether the United States and its allies have the right plan in place to realize this goal.

Critics point to the well-worn narrative about North Korea as a regime that cannot be trusted, will never give up its nuclear program, and is only playing the international community in order to buy time. In fact, it adheres to its long-held strategy of driving a wedge between the United States and South Korea that eventually drives the former from the peninsula and lays the groundwork for eventual Korean reunification under Pyongyang's control. The nuclear program is critical to this strategy since it deters the United States from pursuing regime change.

The real question for many Pyongyang watchers and Asia experts concerns the United States. The desired outcome for North Korea remains the same (denuclearization), but U.S. policy has changed radically under President Trump. In the year and a half since taking office, the rhetoric of the Trump administration has shifted from "Fire and Fury" to "Falling in Love". Some analysts believe that this is in keeping with President Trump's traditional strategy of taking a challenge head-on and then backing off to see what gains have been made. Others believe that his strategy is purely transactional; when pressure and threats did not work, the United States shifted to engagement. Some believe the current administration has no strategy beyond the traditional sole U.S. objective of achieving denuclearization. The vaunted Maximum Pressure Strategy resonates with many, but is based on assumptions of international support that have never fully materialized.

This paper considers this narrative that dominates Western analysis, but argues that it is too simplistic and lacks a real understanding of the other side of the equation. In order to understand the art of the possible when it comes to denuclearization, one must begin with the North Korean calculus. What is the role of the nuclear program? How does it fit within North Korea's military doctrine? How is it related to the legitimacy of the leader and the basic goals of the regime? This paper argues that the foundations of the nuclear program go back to the early 1950s and over the decades have grown in importance as North Korea's conventional forces have atrophied. At the same time, the legitimacy of the Kim family has become intertwined with the nuclear program. To simply relinquish the program or even trade it up front for some promise of economic and security guarantees risks not only undermining North Korea's self-perceived need for a deterrent against U.S. aggression, but rips at the very legitimacy of the Kim family. In other words, the nuclear program is tied to the regime's two fundamental goals: regime survival and perpetuation of Kim family rule.

If this is the case, it is little wonder that three U.S. administrations have failed to make much headway in eliminating North Korea's nuclear program. At most, the program has slowed down occasionally, but has never come close to meeting the U.S.-professed requirements of complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID). This paper argues that the failure of the U.S. North Korea policy is largely due to

the fact that it is based on the idea of removing the nuclear program rather than addressing the rationale for the program itself. This is both a sequencing problem and an optics problem. In terms of sequencing, the United States has chosen to focus almost exclusively on denuclearization and has placed it at the front end of the negotiating process. As the weaker power in this asymmetric relationship, North Korea cannot be the first to make concessions—to do so would only render it weaker.

From an optics perspective, by focusing exclusively on denuclearization, the United States has turned its negotiations with North Korea into a zero-sum game where there can only be one winner and one loser. Unless Kim Jong-un can find another source of legitimacy to replace the nuclear program, he cannot afford to part with the program as the United States is currently demanding. This is the reason North Korea has called for a phased approach to “denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula”. Such ambiguous language creates the space the regime needs to draw out the process without much real sacrifice. It also holds out the possibility for North Korea to receive security and economic incentives before it takes any major steps with regard to its nuclear program.

In the simplest terms, the United States should design a strategy that removes the rationale from the nuclear program in such a way as to avoid undermining Kim Jong-un’s two primary objectives of regime survival and perpetuation of Kim family rule. This strategy is based on five key steps:

- First, the United States needs to open the aperture for negotiation by approaching denuclearization as an end goal rather than the opening move in negotiations with North Korea.
- Second, the Trump administration should adopt a phased process whereby denuclearization is part of a confidence-building process of reciprocity.
- Third, denuclearization should be nested in a larger peace regime process, thereby mitigating the fallout from any concessions North Korea makes on its nuclear program.
- Fourth, the United States should consider security guarantees that both guarantee the survival of the regime (declaration of the end of the Korean conflict) and the Kim family. In other words, redefine the U.S.-North Korean relationship from one of adversaries to one of ordinary nations.
- Fifth, the Trump administration should consider easing sanctions in return for concessions on the nuclear program in order to lay the foundation for economic improvement to replace the nuclear program as the source of legitimacy for the Supreme Leader. Begin with U.S./ROK unilateral sanctions and move to UN sanctions.<sup>1</sup>

This will not be a quick process; it may take years, if not decades, to achieve. There could be backsliding as both sides learn to trust each other. However, it is a flexible strategy: it can be calibrated depending on North Korea’s actions, dialed up if Pyongyang makes good on its agreements and dialed back if it is obfuscating or fails to follow through on its promises. This strategy can help the United States and its allies build leverage in their relationship with North Korea, which they do not currently have. This strategy will also test certain assumptions about the art of the possible when it comes North Korea and denuclearization. Up to this point, North Korea’s lack of support for denuclearization can be blamed in part on its internal equities. By addressing those equities, we can see how far North Korea is willing to go. In the end, we may

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<sup>1</sup> According to Joseph Yun, former U.S. special representative for North Korea policy, easing sanctions is not an easy process. For United Nations sanctions, it would require the UNSC voting to remove the sanctions. This would be difficult, as many sanctions explicitly state that sanctions are to remain in place until there is complete denuclearization. Unilateral U.S. sanctions would require legislation from Congress. That said, sanctions could be tempered through such measures as giving the North sanctions waivers.

have to live with a nascent nuclear program, but we are not going to know unless we first remove the rationale.

Finally, there is the issue of China. Since the end of the Cold War, Beijing has been North Korea's sole benefactor and primary source of economic aid. As such, the United States and its allies have looked to China as a key interlocutor to solve the challenge posed by North Korea.<sup>2</sup> However, this strategy has given China an issue which it can use to its own advantage in its larger regional competition with the United States. In many regards, the idea of removing the United States from the Korean Peninsula is Beijing's goal, since to do so would remove a key anchor for the U.S. posture in Asia. Kim Jong-un has pointed out that this issue no longer needs to be on the negotiating table, as he sees the United States as a counterweight to his powerful neighbor to the north. As such, an effective U.S. strategy should not focus just on North Korea, but fold denuclearization into a larger Asia strategy designed to manage the rise of China. A peace regime that builds confidence with North Korea could at the same time drive a wedge between Beijing and Pyongyang. By giving North Korea an alternative to China in terms of economic and security guarantees, Washington can begin to woo Kim Jong-un away from China's orbit and complicate Beijing's strategy for keeping the United States off-balance.

In summary, this paper makes the argument for a fundamental reworking of U.S. North Korea policy in an effort to find traction where in the past it has been lacking. This will entail challenging our assumptions and holding a conversation with the American people who have come to see North Korea in cartoonish terms and as a member of the Axis of Evil. There is no silver bullet that will allow the United States to dictate to North Korea the terms of surrender of its nuclear program. Seventy years of mistrust and arms buildup have left engagement as the only viable way forward. However, before going down that path, we need a coherent strategy backed by a strong political will.

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<sup>2</sup> The view that China has influence inside Pyongyang is often overblown. While it is true that China holds a lifeline for North Korea in terms of fuel oil and other economic aid, the ability for Beijing to sway Pyongyang's thinking on many issues is blunted because of the distrust that the Kim family holds towards China. This distrust, and some would claim deep dislike, has its origins before the creation of the North Korean state. In the 1930s, Chinese Communist partisans, which allied with Kim and his guerrilla unit to fight the Japanese, turned on the future North Korean leader and many of his partisans out of the belief that they were collaborators. Kim Il-sung was arrested in 1934 and spent time in a Chinese detention camp. During the Korean War, Kim suffered a major loss of face at the hands of China's top general, Peng Dehuai, who chided the young Korean leader for his "childish leadership," which led to losses to American forces and the sidelining of North Korean forces in favor of the more capable Chinese troops that came to his rescue. Finally, on 18 April 1975, Kim Il-sung visited Beijing in an effort to convince Mao Zedong to back a second war of unification on the Korean Peninsula. According to Chinese records, Mao ignored Kim's proposal and sent him home empty handed. Many believe this meeting marked the point when the North Korean leadership realized that it could not rely absolutely on Chinese support, bolstering the Kim family's instinct to chart an independent policy course. Allegedly Kim Jong-il wrote in his last will and testament that his heir should look to China for support, but should never trust Beijing. See Blaine Harden, "Why Can't China Control Kim Jong-un? It's Family History," *Frontline*, 01 October 2017 and "Kim Il-sung wanted China's Support for second Korean War: summit records," *Mainichi*, 01 September 2016.

# Introduction

For the Pyongyang-watching community, 2018 has been an unusual year. Following two years of missile and nuclear tests, Kim Jong-un pivoted toward diplomacy in his New Year's Day speech. North Korea's high-profile participation in the Olympics was followed by a flurry of leader-to-leader summits in China between the two Koreas, culminating in the Singapore Summit where for the first time a sitting U.S. president met with the leader of North Korea. Though the Panmunjom Declaration and the U.S.-North Korean Joint Statement generated during these dialogues are few on details, they raised hopes that elusive peace on the Korean Peninsula may finally be in sight. However, as summer gives way to fall, those hopes, which some would call naivety, have faded as stagnation has set in.

Many argue that diplomacy that does not lead with North Korea giving up major portions of its nuclear program is a fool's errand. That North Korea cheats and has no intention of surrendering its nuclear program under any circumstances is part and parcel of the narrative that pervades the Western press and much of the Pyongyang-watching and policymaking communities. This narrative also holds that Kim Jong-un, as his father and grandfather before him, harbors a strategy that is designed to drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul, drive the United States from the peninsula, and eventually bring the entire peninsula under the control of Pyongyang. It is only through such a strategy that the Korean people can realize their destiny and the Kim family can be secure from the external threats that have lurked in the shadows for more than seventy years.

This study will look in depth at the North Korean calculus in order to determine whether the narrative outlined above fits with the likely reality that Kim Jong-un faces as he steers his regime toward an uncertain future. We begin with an examination of Kim's political calculus. How does the nuclear program relate to his position as leader? What is his range of authority when it comes to the future of the nuclear program, and is he a rational actor? We then move to the role the nuclear program plays in North Korea's military doctrine. Is the nuclear program just for prestige, or does it have a real military purpose? Does the program have only a defensive role, or could it be used offensively to push a particular agenda? In other words, how does the nuclear program figure into Kim's strategic calculus? Is it something that can eventually be given away as part of a peace regime?

A careful consideration of these questions can create the framework for a successful U.S. strategy going forward. For decades, U.S. policymakers have wrestled with the North Korean challenge. In the end, a long-lasting solution never materialized, leading many pundits to describe North Korea as the land of no good options. This paper examines this tortured history and concludes with a discussion of why U.S. policy has failed, what long-held assumptions need to be reconsidered, and what building blocks need to be put in place to find traction in Pyongyang, maintain critical alliances, and position the United States in the Asian region well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Along these lines, this paper will conclude with some suggested changes to U.S. North Korea policy and strategy.



# Assessing the Building Blocks of North Korea's Strategic Calculus

## The Leader

Any assessment of North Korea, especially as it relates to policy and strategy, must begin with the Supreme Leader. He is the ultimate decision-maker, but just as important, he is the center of legitimacy for the regime. When it comes to assessing the Leader's calculus, especially one so early in his tenure as leader, two factors need to be considered: rationality and power. Is the Leader driven by pragmatic goals and objectives, or is he deluded by some sense of manifest destiny? Are there boundaries to his decision-making beyond which he cannot stray? Answering these questions will create the framework through which to understand Kim Jong-un's relationship to issues such as the nuclear program.<sup>3</sup>

### Is Kim Jong-un a rational actor?

This question has been raised by outside observers throughout the Kim Jong-un era. In 2017, the young leader's rationality was questioned as he entered into a very personal exchange with the American president after the latter referred to him in front of the United Nations as "Rocket Man", said he had placed his country on "a suicide mission", and threatened to "totally destroy" North Korea unless Pyongyang backed down from its nuclear challenge. Kim responded in a personally-delivered message in the name of Chairman of the State Affairs Commission, in which he called the president a "dotard" and threatened the "highest level of hardline countermeasure in history".<sup>4</sup> Words such as "madman" and "irrational actor" appeared in the world press as it sought to game out what would come next. Analysts were left wrangling with how best to characterize Kim Jong-un in terms of his boundaries and what drives him to action.

There are a number of profiles that have been created in an attempt to explain Kim Jong-un's actions. The most obvious departure from the way his father operated is Kim Jong-un's open persona. He conveys an impression of an outgoing, people-friendly, and ambitious leader, markedly different from his father Kim Jong-il's isolationist, solitary, and secretive image. Kim Jong-un appears to be comfortable giving speeches and interacting with large groups of ordinary citizens, whereas his father only gave one publicly recorded speech that lasted twelve seconds. This aspect of Kim Jong-un's leadership style harkens back to his grandfather, Kim Il-sung. Defector reporting also paints a picture of a young and impetuous Supreme Leader who is sometimes quick to make decisions without seeking advice. Other profiles describe him as thin-skinned and easily angered, especially if his authority or legitimacy are challenged. The stories of his purges of senior leadership officials fit this personality profile. That said, while he apparently understands

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<sup>3</sup> This discussion of Kim Jong-un and rationalism first appeared in Ken E. Gause, "Madman or Rational Actor? Kim Jong-un's Nuclear Calculus," in John Gartner and Steven Buser, eds., *Rocket Man: Nuclear Madness and the Mind of Donald Trump* (Ashville, NC: Chiron Publications, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Personal statements by the supreme leader occur annually on New Year's Day. Personal statements during a crisis are extremely rare, if not unprecedented. Therefore, the dynamics behind it are worthy of analysis for what it says about his decision-making calculus and whether it is driven in part by emotion over intellect.

the tremendous power of the position he holds, he also understands that there are constraints established by his father and grandfather that the system imposes. How eager he is to challenge some of these constraints remains unclear. His decision to reveal the failure of the Unha-3 missile test in April 2012 may have been his own decision or could have resulted from the fact that he listened to advisors who advocated for transparency, given the unprecedented openness leading up to the launch. However, can we consider him to be a rational actor?

There is a wide literature on the issue of rationality and decision-making. That said, rationality is exceptionally difficult to define and there is a lack of consensus about how it can be applied when looking at adversary actions and interactions with the international community. A 1991 RAND study of adversary behavior analysis outlines several points individual scholars have raised in their attempts to codify rationality:

- Rationality requires decision-analytic thinking preceded by a reasonable search for adequate options.
- Rationality requires considering the utilities of various outcomes, the probability of those outcomes for each option, and a calculation such as how to maximize expected utility.
- The concept of limited rationality posits that decisions will have a superficially logical basis—i.e., a “reasonable” relationship between objectives and decisions. It does not imply that the decisions are wise and sound. Rather, it implies only that the decision-making has satisfied certain minimum criteria for what passes in the real world as rationality.<sup>5</sup>

In the case of Kim Jong-un, case studies demonstrate that he is a rational actor if we accept the premise that his decisions are driven by a desire to perpetuate two centers of gravity (or key objectives): the survival of the regime and the continuation of Kim family rule.<sup>6</sup> His may might not lead to the most efficient outcomes, but they point to his adherence to a “limited rationality” that is traceable in terms of their motivation.<sup>7</sup>

### *Case 1: The execution of Jang Song-taek*

On 12 December 2013, Jang Song-taek, Kim Jong-un’s uncle and defacto number-two man in the regime was tried by a special military tribunal of the Ministry of State Security and executed, according to state media. His execution was the most significant since purges carried out in the 1950s by Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-un's grandfather and North Korea's founder. Since 1960, purged top officials have not usually been killed, and the denunciations of purged figures have not typically been so extreme and public. Although

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<sup>5</sup> Paul K. Davis and John Arquilla, *Thinking About Opponent Behavior in Crisis and Conflict: A Generic Model for Analysis and Group Discussion* (Santa Monica: RAND Note N-3322-JS, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> If we were to posit that Kim’s decisions were driven by other factors, such as ensuring the prosperity and well-being of the North Korean people, then one could question whether he is a rational actor.

<sup>7</sup> These three case studies were chosen because they either describe events that led the international community to label Kim Jong-un as “crazy” or “irrational” or they demonstrated limited rationality in terms of decision-making. Of the handful of high-profile events that have occurred since Kim Jong-un came to power, not one fit the characteristics of an irrational act—i.e., fundamentally went against Kim Jong-un’s core interests.

high-ranking leaders, including members of the Kim family, have been deposed before, their demise has not been this public or dramatic.<sup>8</sup>

Jang's purge was followed by claims in the international community that Kim Jong-un was a bloody tyrant who was willing to attack his own family on a whim. Subsequent information coming out of the regime suggests a complicated story of betrayal and growing threat to Kim Jong-un's authority within the regime. An investigation into Jang's affairs conducted in 2012 and early 2013 revealed his growing control over a number of hard currency operations, many of them at the expense of other powerbrokers within the regime. This had led to growing tension within the second echelon of power and a steadily intensifying power struggle between Jang's forces, the military, Party, and internal security apparatuses. In addition, Jang had showed increasingly less deference to Kim Jong-un and his legitimacy as the sole leader of the regime. Finally, Jang's relations with the Chinese leadership were increasingly questioned by the Kim family, especially after he reportedly failed to secure Kim family funds from Chinese banks. Therefore, Jang was becoming a disruptor within the regime. Kim Jong-un's decision to purge his uncle and dismantle his growing fiefdom was a rational act. To allow Jang to continue to pursue his agenda would have inhibited Kim's ability to fully consolidate his power.<sup>9</sup>

### *Case 2: The Sony hack*

In November 2014, a hacker group which identified itself by the name "Guardians of Peace" (GOP) demanded that Sony pull its film *The Interview*, a comedy about a plot to assassinate North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, and threatened terrorist attacks at cinemas screening the film. On November 24, GOP leaked a release of confidential data from the film studio Sony Pictures. The data included personal information about Sony Pictures employees and their families, e-mails between employees, information about executive salaries at the company, copies of then-unreleased Sony films, and other information. After major U.S. cinema chains opted not to screen the film in response to these threats, Sony elected to cancel the film's formal premiere and mainstream release, opting to skip directly to a digital release followed by a limited theatrical release the next day. United States intelligence officials, after evaluating the software, techniques, and network sources used in the hack, alleged that the attack was sponsored by North Korea. North Korea denied all responsibility.

In the open source, the perpetrator of the Sony hack is still open to debate. Regardless of whether North Korea was responsible for carrying out the hack, it no doubt supported the attack, the motivation of which demonstrates an effort to control escalation while sending a message of retribution to the international community. The timing of *The Interview*'s release raised issues for North Korea. It was during the period of its diplomatic charm campaign designed to secure international aid for the regime, a critical component to Kim Jong-un's ability to consolidate his power. If the regime were to conduct an overt aggressive provocation, it would have undoubtedly ended any hopes of securing this aid. Instead, Kim Jong-un (if he in fact ordered the attack) opted for a covert means of exhorting revenge. By resorting to a cyber-attack, the regime obscured its fingerprints from the operation, pinpointed the target, allowed Pyongyang to claim

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of Jang Song-taek's purge, see Ken E. Gause, *North Korean House of Cards: Leadership Dynamics Under Kim Jong-un* (Washington, DC: HRNK, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> During the period of the regent structure, Kim Jong-un often complained that his actions were constrained by the "old guard." Author's discussion with source with first-hand knowledge of this issue, September 2017.

innocence, all the while keeping the regime's diplomacy on track. Since the attack, the international media has become reticent about lampooning Kim Jong-un and his regime. Given Kim's calculus, which includes protecting his image and legitimacy within the regime, the Sony hack makes rational sense.

### *Case 3: The assassination of Kim Jong-nam*

On 13 February 2017, Kim Jong-nam, Kim Jong-un's older half-brother, died after being attacked by two women in Malaysia with VX nerve agent during his return trip to Macau at klia2, the low-cost carrier terminal at Kuala Lumpur International Airport. The Malaysian government pointed to North Korea as being behind the assassination. The subsequent investigation provided evidence of North Korean involvement, although Pyongyang vehemently proclaimed its innocence. A standoff between the two countries ensued, in which North Korea prevented Malaysian nationals from leaving the country until Malaysia released Kim Jong-nam's body in its custody along with three North Korean nationals believed to be tied to the attack. Eventually, both sides agreed to release their "hostages" and Kim's body was returned to North Korea. The only people arrested for the assassination were the two women (one Indonesian and the other Vietnamese) who carried out the attack.

Of all the high-profile actions by North Korea during the Kim Jong-un era, the assassination of Kim Jong-nam is the most opaque in terms of its motivation. The theories range from sending a message to the North Korean expatriate population in the wake of several senior-level defections to a standing order issued by Kim Jong-un soon after coming to power. The reasoning has led many to question Kim Jong-un's sanity and label him a "crazed lunatic". However, some sources point to a more rational explanation for Kim Jong-un's decision to order the assassination of his half-brother. If it is true that Kim's power consolidation had entered its final phase, this would have been the time in which he needed to ensure that the House of Kim was in order. Any pretenders to the throne needed to be eliminated. An older sibling, especially one who had fallen out with the regime and did not owe his loyalty to Kim Jong-un, would be considered a potential threat. In the months leading up to the assassination, North Korean defector organizations had reportedly reached out to the older Kim to head a so-called "government in exile". Kim Jong-nam's ties with China could also have been worrisome given the increasing tension between the two neighbors. Finally, Kim Kyong-hui, Kim Jong-un's aunt, was Kim Jong-nam's protector within the regime. She has not been seen in public since September 2013 and was rumored to either be dead or in a hospital. In any case, her political influence was rumored to have waned, giving her nephew the latitude to make preparations for his final push for consolidation. If true, this ruthless act is an example of limited rationality. The execution of the assassination was not done in the most effective manner, but in the end, it served to promote Kim Jong-un's ultimate interests.

## **Setting the Boundaries for North Korea's Strategic Calculus**

The issue of rationality establishes whether the Leader is operating in accordance with rules that can be understood as pragmatic and in the Leader's best interest. The examples cited above suggest that for Kim Jong-un this is the case. Kim's two centers of gravity of regime survival and perpetuation of Kim family rule are both bolstered by the possession of a nuclear capability. The centrality and importance of the nuclear program to the regime and the Leader are manifest in the fact that mention of the program in recent years has been added to the constitution and the Party Charter. This gives the nuclear program a legal standing that cannot be easily undone. To set a plan for denuclearization into motion, Kim Jong-un would

likely have to convene a senior Party body, such as a Congress or a Conference, followed by a meeting of the country's parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly.

The narrative in the West, especially in the aftermath of the Singapore Summit, ignores the role that the nuclear program plays in North Korea's calculus as it exists within boundaries of security policy established by both Kim Jong-il and Kim Il-sung. Over a span of decades, the rationale for the nuclear program developed as North Korea's conventional deterrent frayed and the balance of power on the peninsula shifted clearly in the favor of the United States and South Korea.

## **Strategic Mission and Military Doctrine**

North Korea appears to have a range of strategic missions that inform its military doctrine. Historically, Pyongyang's primary national goal has been to reunify the Korean Peninsula on North Korea's terms.<sup>10</sup> This goal is clearly stated in both the North Korean constitution and the rules of the Workers Party of Korea (KWP).<sup>11</sup> This represents the upper end of the range of acceptable outcomes (discussed below). It is the most desired outcome.

Over the last three decades, many Pyongyang watchers have argued that conditions in North Korea have declined to a point where survival of the regime has supplanted reunification as the primary goal. This represents the lower end of the range of acceptable outcomes.

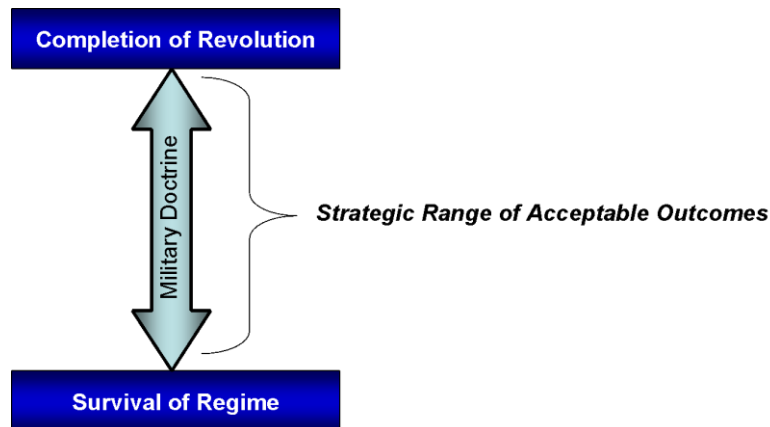
Much like any sophisticated decision-making entity, North Korea most likely assesses risk when considering which strategies to implement in support of its national goal. Thus, when considering how to behave politically, economically, and militarily, the preferred strategies are those that are assessed to produce outcomes that guarantee regime survival while promoting the possibility of completing the revolution (i.e., unifying the peninsula under Pyongyang control). What emerges are strategies designed to produce an acceptable strategic range of outcomes, which as shown in Figure 1 is bounded by "survival of the regime" on one end and "completion of the revolution" on the other. Military doctrine is developed to support strategies that fall within this acceptable range.

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<sup>10</sup> Homer T. Hodge. "North Korea's Military Strategy," *Parameters*, Spring 2003.

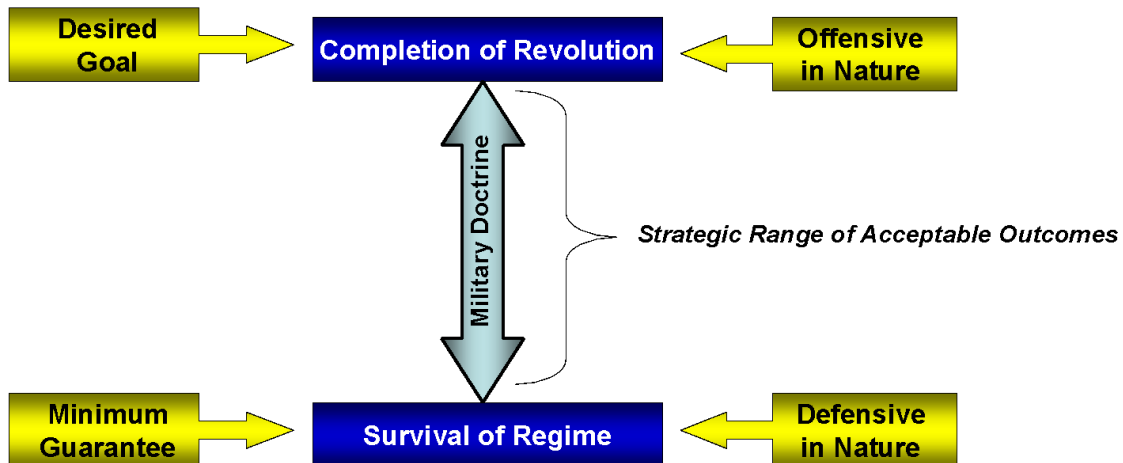
<sup>11</sup> The North Korean constitution describes reunification as "the supreme national task." The preamble to the charter of the [North] KWP declares that "the present task of the Party is to ensure the complete victory of socialism in the DPRK and the accomplishment of the revolutionary goals of national liberation and the people's democracy in the entire area of the country." James M. Minnich. *North Korean People's Army*. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005); James M. Minnich, *North Korean Tactics*. (Ft. Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and Staff College, 2001); and *DPRK's Security Policy, Military Strategy*. (Seoul, KIDA, 2006).

Figure 1: North Korea’s Range of Strategic Outcomes



In order to achieve reunification (under North Korean rule), North Korea would have to employ a winning military strategy. Thus, the closer the expected outcomes are assessed as fulfilling “completion of the revolution”, the more offensive and belligerent the associated military strategy is likely to become. Conversely, guaranteeing North Korea’s minimum threshold of “achieving regime survival” involves preservation strategies; therefore, the more the expected outcomes are believed to fulfill only “survival of the regime”, the more defensive in nature the military strategy becomes.<sup>12</sup> This is illustrated in Figure 2.

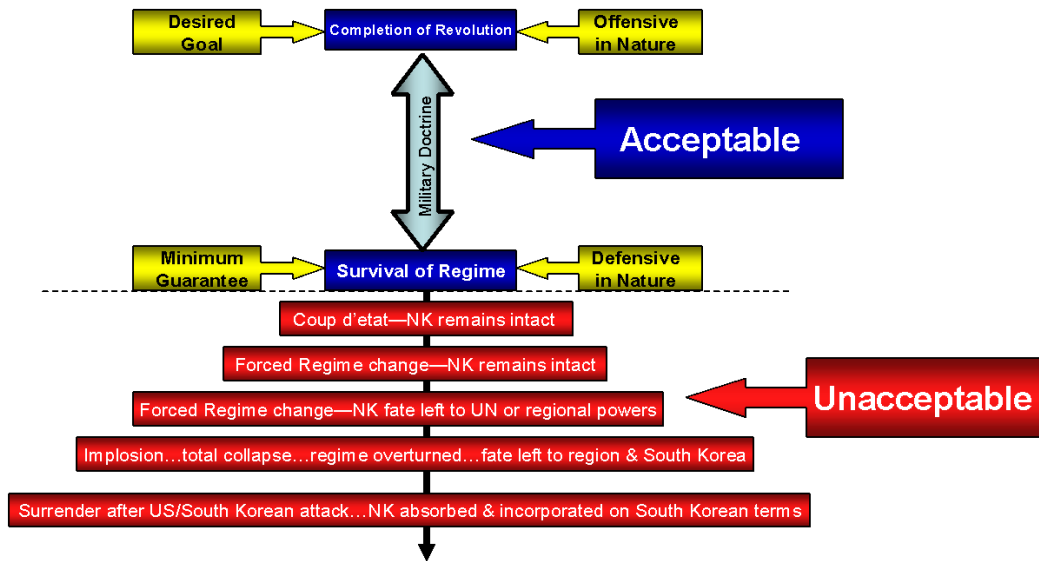
Figure 2: Nature of North Korea’s Range of Strategic Outcomes



For North Korea, outcomes that are assessed as no longer guaranteeing regime survival are considered unacceptable. Strategies and doctrines that might bring about this outcome are avoided (Figure 3).

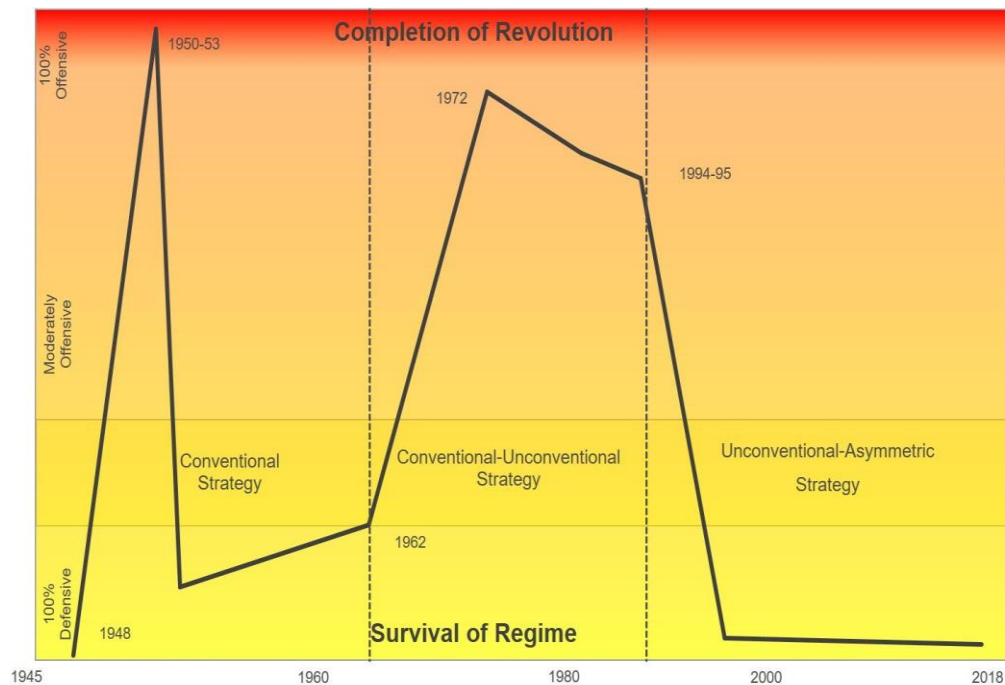
<sup>12</sup> This assessment of offensive and defensive strategies is based on a reading of North Korean literature. Discussions of “completion of the revolution” have normally included references to offensive capabilities and the ability to unify the peninsula by force. “Regime survival” discussions almost always reference deterrence and more defensive capabilities.

Figure 3: Acceptability of Outcomes



Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il adhered to these boundaries of Completion of the Revolution and Survival of the Regime as they made decisions regarding national security and foreign policy. In the decades since the Korean War, North Korea learned from foreign conflicts and changes in the art of war that pushed the regime along the continuum from the upper end (Completion of the Revolution) to the lower end (Survival of the Regime). This movement in policy and strategy was accompanied by an increasing reliance on asymmetric capabilities, such as nuclear weapons, designed to hold firm the minimum acceptable outcome for the regime. The evolution of North Korea's military doctrine (Figure 4) reveals an increasingly hardening framework in which Kim Jong-un finds himself today.

**Figure 4: North Korean military doctrine stages<sup>13</sup>**



The idea of a nuclear deterrent has been a part of an ongoing conversation inside North Korea since the 1950s. The assured destructiveness of nuclear weapons and the lack of North Korea’s defense against them were significantly reinforced by U.S. threats to employ these weapons to end the Korean War. These threats had a truly profound impact on the North Korean leadership that cannot be overstated and has been a central principle in its strategic thought and actions ever since. Below is a brief history of the evolution of that thought:

- North Korean military doctrine shifted dramatically in December 1962 away from the doctrine of regular warfare to one that embraced people’s war. At the Fifth Plenum of the Fourth KWP Central Committee in December 1962, Kim Il-sung espoused the Four Military Guidelines: arm the entire population; fortify the entire country; train the entire army as a "cadre army"; and modernize weaponry, doctrine, and tactics under the principle of self-reliance in national defense. The adoption of this military line signaled a shift from a Soviet-style strategy to a Maoist protracted war of attrition. Conventional warfare strategy was incorporated into and subordinated to the overall concept of people’s war and the mobilization of the entire people through reinforcement of ideological training. These principles were formally adopted in Article 60 of the 1992 constitution.
- Beginning in the 1970s, North Korea’s military doctrine began to address persistent concerns about the U.S. nuclear threat. This led to the establishment of a systematic program for the construction of underground facilities and a new emphasis on operations on the chemical and

<sup>13</sup> The trend line depicts the offensive nature of North Korean military strategy and doctrine as it tracks across three major phases from 1945 to 2018. The top point represents strategy and doctrine manifested by actions that are 100% offensive. The mid-point indicates moderately offensive strategy and doctrine. The bottom point represents strategy and doctrine manifested by actions that are 100% defensive. An important point that should be kept in mind throughout this paper involves “offensive” versus “defensive” strategies. A “defensive” strategy can be made up of “offensive” capabilities. Likewise, an “offensive” strategy can contain defensive capabilities.



nuclear battlefield in Korean People's Army (KPA) training. By the end of the decade, the North had begun production of chemical weapons, which the North viewed as a viable substitute that, in combination with an expanding and modernizing KPA, could successfully deter the use of nuclear weapons by the United States.

- In the 1980s, the rudimentary elements of a nuclear weapons program were put in place, accompanied by North Korea's rapprochement with the Soviet Union, which led to the acquisition of a variety of launch platforms—MiG 23, 29, SCUD B, and the foundations of an ICBM program. By the early 1980s, Kim Il-sung had come to the conclusion that reunification could not be achieved with the rapidly deteriorating conventional KPA force.
- With the end of the Cold War, the disappearance of its patrons, and the corresponding deterioration of its large conventional military advantage, the regime began to move away from an outright embrace of a reunification strategy (the so-called doctrine of Occupying South Korea, All the Way to Pusan, in Three Days) to one based on regime preservation. This period also marked the beginning of a change of emphasis from the offensive to deterrence, and to total mobilization and resistance, as key components of North Korea's military doctrine.
- Embedded in this doctrine was the need for a nuclear deterrent. A detailed study of Operation Desert Storm by the KPA General Staff in the early 1990s allegedly resulted in the conclusion that chemical weapons did not hinder the United States from soundly defeating Iraq, nor could they deter nuclear use on the peninsula. Rather, chemical weapons were now increasingly viewed as basic tools with which to fight a war. Only nuclear weapons were seen as a viable deterrent to the U.S. nuclear threat.
- Two events at the end of the Kim Jong-il era reinforced the perception of the need for nuclear weapons. The North Korea assessment of the operations in Libya and Syria—Libya relinquishing its WMD programs under pressure from the United States followed by the March 2011 U.S. attack on that country and the 2007 Israeli airstrike destroying a North Korean reactor under construction in Syria at al-Kibar—led to the conclusion that neither event would have occurred had those nations possessed nuclear weapons.

At the end of 2011, Kim Jong-il died and was succeeded by his 27-year-old heir, Kim Jong-un. The new Supreme Leader was young and inexperienced, with only a couple of years on the job as heir apparent before assuming power. He was surrounded by a regent structure composed of Kim family members and close Kim family associates. The North Korean military high command, headed by a powerful chief of the General Staff, Ri Yong-ho, exerted strong influence within the political space.

For Kim Jong-un to consolidate his power, he needed to conduct politics, as well as show progress on the economy and critical defense systems, which included the nuclear program, an important part of his father's legacy. The requirements of this consolidation shaped the first several years of Kim Jong-un's rule and created a number of challenges for the regime. Kim's stated desire to improve the economy collided with his need to shore up the country's nuclear deterrent. As such, Kim Jong-un found himself in a catch-22 in terms of foreign policy. By demonstrating progress on the nuclear and missile programs, he closed avenues for economic and diplomatic outreach, causing the Obama administration to give up hope and the Trump administration to struggle to find a way ahead in the land of no good options.

However, before exploring the tortured history of U.S.-North Korea negotiations, let us first examine what lies ahead if North Korea eventually secures a fully-functioning nuclear deterrent. Without understanding how North Korean nuclear doctrine might unfold, which is the subject a wide debate within the Pyongyang-watching community, it is difficult to understand just what may be at stake.

## Nuclear Doctrine in the Kim Jong-un Era

Over the next few years, assuming that the regime does not collapse or give in to denuclearization, Kim Jong-un's nuclear doctrine will become a focal point for debate in the international community. Whether he will seek to use his nuclear deterrent beyond its defensive role to backstop a campaign of coercion, and whether North Korea's nuclear capabilities will be tied to a concept of first (or preemptive) strike or remain a second strike weapon is not entirely clear and probably depends on the circumstances. From the few doctrinal pronouncements that have been made public on nuclear employment, it appears as if Kim has given himself great latitude. How much stock Kim places on his new-found capability to change the calculus of his adversaries, in the minds of many, will be reflective of his understanding of the balance of power in the region and his realistic ability to change the status quo. Only if he is delusional, the argument goes, will he attempt to engage in an unprovoked game of high-stakes chicken.

It should be noted that testing the boundaries with a new-found weapon system, such as a nuclear deterrent, is not without precedent. One illustrative example is Pakistan, which effectively declared itself a nuclear state in 1998 by conducting its own nuclear tests weeks after a successful nuclear test by India. The following year, emboldened by its new status, Pakistan sought to seize disputed territory in Kashmir. It sent forces across the border to take up positions in Kargil, a district in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir near the Line of Control separating Pakistani and Indian military forces. Once discovered, Pakistan claimed that the forces were local militants and denied responsibility. While there is some evidence that India was careful to control the escalation of the conflict in response to Pakistan's thinly veiled nuclear threats, it did not deter India from responding with airpower to push Pakistani forces out of its territory. While Pakistani military leaders appeared to believe that their lack of a credible conventional deterrent, combined with India's growing military capabilities, made limited nuclear options a necessity, Pakistan's failure to extract any gains from the operation demonstrated that its nuclear arsenal did not affect the dynamics of the conflict in the ways its leaders had hoped. Not only was Pakistan repelled, but India has since taken steps to provide itself with more options for deterring or responding to low-level conventional provocations by Pakistan to prevent escalation to nuclear war.

The simple fact that Kim Jong-un might explore what he can gain with his country's new capability does not make him irrational; in fact, it is very likely that he will. The question is under what circumstances and in what way Kim will probe and test his advantage. The circumstances under which North Korea might resort to coercion and nuclear blackmail will be to get out of a box.<sup>14</sup> The increased sanctions are already beginning to take their toll inside North Korea. By the time North Korea fully develops its nuclear deterrent, the Maximum Pressure campaign (assuming that engagement has failed) will be in full swing. Kim Jong-un will be increasingly concerned about the impact of the pressure on his ability to control the regime and enforce his legitimacy. This will likely become a strong motivating force for Kim to see what he can get if he pushes back, using the nuclear deterrent to confound the response of his adversaries. But will he be indiscriminate in how he uses this nuclear threat? That is where rationality comes into play.

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<sup>14</sup> It should be noted that contrary to conventional wisdom, North Korea has given no indication that it plans to use its nuclear program for coercion. An examination of regime pronouncements during 33 military incidents since 2008 turned up little or no evidence that the regime attempted to use nuclear threats to affect the outcome of the standoff or incident.

Most likely, Kim Jong-un will act in accordance with his two primary objectives: regime survival and perpetuation of Kim family rule. This means that he will only climb the escalatory ladder to a point at which he believes the United States will be deterred from retaliation. Up until that point, North Korea might explore a pressure campaign designed to extract concessions (economic and security), primarily from South Korea. North Korea's strategy could include conventional military attacks against South Korean assets.

If Kim Jong-un tries such attacks and fails, or comes to believe that the United States and South Korea are prepared and willing to respond to his provocations with overwhelming force much further down the escalatory ladder (via an allied strategic messaging campaign), then like Pakistan, he is likely to learn the extent to which the nuclear deterrent allows him to use his conventional forces as part of a brinkmanship strategy. His attempts to force the international community to accept North Korea as a nuclear power or even extort concessions will collide with the overriding elements of Kim's strategic calculus. If his actions up to this point are any indication, Kim Jong-un will act rationally in pursuit of regime survival and perpetuation of Kim family rule.

The other angle many analysts take in making judgements about Kim's rationality is how he would employ his nuclear weapons once he has an established deterrent. Under what circumstances would he choose to launch a nuclear weapon? Can he be trusted to be a rational actor while his finger is on the nuclear button?<sup>15</sup> North Korea's military thinkers have identified two purposes for the use of nuclear weapons in wartime: 1) to repel invasion or attack from a hostile nuclear weapons state (i.e., the United States) on its own territory and 2) to make retaliatory strikes against an enemy that has already struck first using regime-threatening forces (presumably nuclear) against North Korea. In March 2013 at a Central Committee Plenary meeting, Kim Jong-un provided insight into North Korean thinking about its nuclear program. It appears he preserves the right to preemption under certain circumstances, one of which was the notion of "imminent threat". He allegedly said, "the U.S. was testing my self-control and getting on my nerves (in March 2013 during the Foal Eagle exercise), but there was no limit to the psychological pressure I could withstand" because "the U.S. threat was not imminent". During the crisis of 2013, the North Korean media alluded to the fact that the regime had developed a set of standard operating procedures for the authorization of the employment of nuclear weapons in wartime. According to *Rodong Sinmun*, "the nuclear weapons of the DPRK can be used only by a final order of the Supreme Commander of the Korean People's Army."

In recent years as U.S. and South Korean rhetoric heated up in response to the growing North Korean missile and nuclear testing program, North Korean doctrine allegedly internalized the need for a first (or preemptive) strike capability to forestall any decapitation strategy. It remains unknown—or ambiguous, at best—how this would play out, and what red lines Kim has that, if passed, would trigger a nuclear attack. However, regardless of whether North Korea has a first strike policy, there is no evidence that Kim Jong-

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<sup>15</sup> It is highly likely that command and control of North Korea's nuclear weapons resides with the Supreme Leader. Only he has the ability to give a launch order. Some have suggested that if Kim Jong-un were to become concerned with his ability to give that order, he might decide to pre-delegate launch authority to field commanders, which could make any future crisis much more difficult to manage. This is a concern currently being debated by Pyongyang watchers after reports surfaced of U.S. offensive cyber strategies designed to disable and destroy North Korean missiles. With such a small nuclear arsenal, some believe, Kim could become anxious in the early stages of a crisis out of fear that his ability to command his strategic assets could become compromised. If Kim has already pre-delegated launch authority, the red lines become even more opaque. Ken E. Gause, "How Kim Jong-un Controls a Crisis: North Korea's Evolving Command and Control of Conventional and Strategic Forces," Paper delivered at the annual KIMS-CNA Workshop (2016). See also Ankit Panda, "Learning to Live with North Korea's Nukes," *The Daily Beast*, 25 October 2018.

un would act irrationally when it comes to the nuclear button. At the bottom line, regime survival remains his first and foremost guiding objective.

# Coping with the North Korean Nuclear Program

This part of the paper examines the impact that the opacity of the North Korean regime has played in stymieing U.S. policy under the past three administrations.<sup>16</sup> By its very nature, the U.S. policymaking process takes place in a vacuum driven largely by U.S. objectives. In the case of North Korea, policy has been based less on assumptions of Pyongyang's calculus than on the imperative to halt the nuclear program and stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

The question is the extent to which a lack of detailed knowledge of these assumptions about the target regime's operations matters. A deeper knowledge of North Korean regime dynamics and decision-making calculus is not in and unto itself sufficient to explain past policy failures and ensure future policy successes; however, this sort of information should be better integrated into the U.S. policymaking process in order to give policymakers a more adaptable policy that is able to take advantage of opportunities that are not often apparent, as well as better understand the efficacy of particular initiatives and their chances of success.

An examination of the Clinton and Bush administration policy blueprints toward North Korea suggests that while there were some obvious differences in perception of the problem, they adhered to very similar strategies.<sup>17</sup> The Bush administration generally viewed North Korea as an aggressive expansionist state that seeks to develop weapons of mass destruction and threaten world peace.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, the Clinton administration did not genuinely consider North Korea to be an irrational revisionist state, despite its rogue behavior. It believed that North Korea's threatening posture arose because of its security fears. Abandoned by its Cold War patrons, economically bankrupt, and internationally isolated, Clinton officials believed that North Koreans consider the pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles as their only path to survive and to secure their regime.<sup>19</sup> Despite these very different perceptions, both administrations adopted a similar approach of engagement.<sup>20</sup> As one Bush advisor noted, diplomatic engagement with North Korea

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<sup>16</sup> While this paper focuses on the U.S. administrations since Clinton, in fact that nuclear issue raised its head under President George H.W. Bush. The North Korean nuclear program came to light in 1988 when U.S. reconnaissance satellites first revealed facilities tied to plutonium reprocessing. Bush engaged Pyongyang to comply with IAEA against nuclear non-proliferation. He offered denuclearization of South Korea and an end to joint U.S.-ROK military exercises. In 1992, the two Koreas signed the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Under the agreement, both sides agreed: not to test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons. Despite the agreement, North Korea officially withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in March 1993 and blocked all inspections to verify its compliance with the earlier IAEA agreement. In 1994, North Korea withdrew from the IAEA agreement. This led the Clinton administration to contemplate military strikes on North Korea's nuclear facilities. See Ty Bomba, "Korea, Machiavelli, & OPLAN 5015," *Modern War*, Issue No. 39 (January-February 2019).

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed comparison of North Korea policy under the Clinton and Bush administrations, see Jihwan Hwang, "Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy toward North Korea: The Clinton and Bush Administrations in Comparative Perspective," *World Affairs*, Vol. 167, No. 1 (Summer 2004).

<sup>18</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," news release, 29 January 2002.

<sup>19</sup> Wendy R. Sherman, "Dealing with Dictators," *New York Times*, 18 July 2002. Sherman was the State Department's counselor during the Clinton administration and had special responsibility for negotiation with North Korea.

<sup>20</sup> For the Bush administration's "comprehensive approach" to foreign policy toward North Korea, see Richard L. Armitage, "A Comprehensive Approach to North Korea," *The Strategic Forum*, no. 159 (National Defense University: Institute for National Strategic Studies, March 1999), <http://www.ndu.edu/inss/strforum/forum159.html>. For the Clinton administration's blueprint, see William J. Perry,

historically has not been a partisan issue.<sup>21</sup> In fact, it has been the approach of choice of administrations dating back to the Reagan era.<sup>22</sup> However, alongside diplomacy was always the threat of more punitive measures.

Within these approaches, it is possible to see the extent to which U.S. understanding of North Korea played a role. For the Clinton administration, there was a belief that insight into the leadership in Pyongyang could be gleaned from “close engagement”. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright, who visited North Korea in 2000, found Kim Jong-il “very decisive and practical and serious”.<sup>23</sup> Although he was somewhat of a mystery to the world and to Americans, Albright did not describe Kim Jong-il as irrational and unpredictable, but as “a very good listener and a good interlocutor”.<sup>24</sup> She also said that because Kim Jong-il “was quite clear in explaining his understanding of U.S. concerns,”<sup>25</sup> serious talks with him “were a very good way to learn more about his intentions, and they made important progress”.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the Clinton administration saw the engagement policy as a good way to build a sense of trust with North Korea, reduce its insecurity, and thereby end its nuclear threat.<sup>27</sup> They contended that various carrots offered by the Clinton administration, such as economic aid, diplomatic normalization, and regime assurance, were able to give Kim Jong-il a stake in the status quo and persuade him that he could best serve his own interests by giving up his nuclear weapons program.<sup>28</sup>

This very personal approach to understanding the leadership in Pyongyang stood in stark contrast to views held in the Bush administration. The Bush administration considered diplomacy a good way to test North Korea’s true intention, whether or not diplomacy holds any real possibility of yielding positive results.<sup>29</sup> The administration started from the premise that the opacity of North Korea’s totalitarian regime made its

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“Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations,” Department of State: Office of the North Korea Policy Coordinator, October 12, 1999, [http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/991012\\_northkorea\\_rpt.html](http://www.state.gov/www/regions/eap/991012_northkorea_rpt.html).

<sup>21</sup> Carl W. Ford, “Engaging North Korea” (speech at Georgetown University, Washington, DC, 21 December 2001), <http://www.nautilus.org/pub/ftp/napsnet/special%5Freports/forddprkuclear.txt>.

<sup>22</sup> When dealing with the North Korean nuclear crisis in the early 1990s, there was little difference in the U.S. foreign policy approach of the first Bush administration and the Clinton administration. Like the Clinton administration, the administration of George H. W. Bush tried to combine carrots and sticks, a strategy that was first pursued by the Reagan administration’s “modest initiative.” The “comprehensive approach” of the second Bush (George W. Bush) administration, laid out in the Armitage Report, was also not so different from the Clinton administration’s approach, which was encapsulated in the Perry Report. See Jihwan Hwang, “Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy toward North Korea: The Clinton and Bush Administrations in Comparative Perspective,” *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> Madeleine K. Albright, press conference, Koryo Hotel, Pyongyang, Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, October 24, 2000, <http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/2000/001024b.html>.

<sup>24</sup> “Albright Ends Historic North Korea Visit,” ABC News, 24 October 2000.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Madeleine K. Albright, press conference, Koryo Hotel as cited in Jihwan Hwang, “Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy toward North Korea: The Clinton and Bush Administrations in Comparative Perspective,” *op. cit.*

<sup>27</sup> Victor D. Cha, “Korea’s Place in the Axis,” *Foreign Affairs* 81, no. 3 (2002): 79–84.

<sup>28</sup> Jihwan Hwang, “Realism and U.S. Foreign Policy toward North Korea: The Clinton and Bush Administrations in Comparative Perspective,” *op. cit.*

<sup>29</sup> “Statement by the President,” June 6, 2001.

decision-making process unknowable. Thus, the Bush administration wanted to test Pyongyang's intentions using diplomacy. The Armitage report explained that the objective of diplomacy should be to offer Pyongyang clear choices regarding its future, such as economic benefits, security assurances, political legitimization, or the certainty of enhanced military deterrence.

The above indicates that the narrow range of U.S. North Korea policy, which was focused on eliminating Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program, was not deeply informed by an understanding of the adversary. Assumptions made about North Korean leadership and its calculus were tied less to Pyongyang dynamics than to broad generalities and conclusions about rationality within the regime and whether Kim Jong-il and the North Korean military were willing to part with their nuclear deterrent.

The question was whether this lack of appreciation of North Korean leadership dynamics really mattered. It did, only to the extent that it may have blinded U.S. policymakers to the evolving constraints on the North Korean leadership to negotiate away its nuclear program, as well as to the areas where potential agreements could have been reached and confidence building measures established if somehow the nuclear issue could have been managed. These potential shortfalls in understanding are detailed more below:

- It is not clear that U.S. policymakers appreciated the policy struggle in Pyongyang that emerged during Kim Il-sung's final years and was directly attuned to American, Japanese, and South Korean policies. The North Korean leadership had taken some steps toward reform in the early 1990s when it tried to rationalize economic management and lure outside investment. These steps, however, clashed with the aims of many within the military whom Kim Jong-il was trying to cultivate as part of the succession process. In the wake of Kim Il-sung's death in 1994 and the famine that followed, Kim Jong-il's latitude on policy reform became restricted as he sought to consolidate his power. As a result, those pragmatists within the regime who were prepared to embrace the Agreed Framework were weakened.<sup>30</sup> This most likely accounted for North Korea's provocative activity leading up to the Agreed Framework, including refusal to allow IAEA inspections and removal of fuel rods at Yongbyon. Similarly, the U.S. failure to ease economic sanctions, as pledged in the agreement, vindicated hardliners who were opposed to the freeze.
- U.S. policymakers were slow to appreciate, or were politically constrained from taking advantage of, a potential diplomatic opening in the late 1990s and early 21<sup>st</sup> century caused by North Korea's worsening economic situation. While Pyongyang was not willing to shift away from its military first policy, Kim signaled in numerous meetings with foreign leaders, including Secretary of State Madeline Albright, his willingness to make deals that would permit North Korea to conduct some reforms so the country could deal with its economic problems.<sup>31</sup> Neither the Clinton nor the Bush administrations, both citing security considerations, were able to take advantage of this momentary shift in North Korean internal, economic deliberations, which was geared in part to taking

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<sup>30</sup> One of North Korea's most promising reformers, Kim Dal-hyon, fell afoul of the evolving power struggle in Pyongyang. Kim Kuk-tae, a longtime mentor to Kim Jong-il, in the early 1990s began to maneuver to oust Kim Dal-hyon, who was serving as acting Prime Minister. When Kim tried to divert 30 percent of energy meant for the military to support mining, Kim Kuk-tae allied with key figures in the military armaments sector (Kim Chol-man and Chong Pyong-ho) to make the argument to Kim Jong-il that the Prime Minister was inhibiting military innovation. Following Kim Dal-hyon's demotion to a factory manager, economic reform, limited as it was, ceased.

<sup>31</sup> In the late 1990s, North Korea began to experiment with some agricultural reforms and private markets. This was done quietly so as not to violate official doctrine and upset the KWP old guard. One long-time Pyongyang watcher referred to it as "stealth reform." Selig Harrison, "Promoting a Soft Landing in Korea," *Foreign Policy*, No. 106 (Spring 1997).

advantage of South Korea's Sunshine Policy.<sup>32</sup> The events of September 11, 2001 hardened the Bush administration's view of North Korea, which was included among the "Axis of Evil" in the 2002 State of the Union address. The visit by Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly in October 2002, in which he provided the North Korean leadership with evidence of that North Korea was continuing nuclear weapons development using uranium enrichment, a different and separate process from the plutonium process the country had frozen earlier, convinced Pyongyang that the international environment was not right for further experiments in economic reform, to say nothing of its hopes of obtaining security guarantees from the United States. By the year's end, both countries had walked away from their respective commitments under the Agreed Framework.<sup>33</sup> North Korea finalized its break in 2003 with its withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

- In the mid-2000s, the United States once again ran afoul of internal North Korean politics which undermined the Six Party Talks. These talks were a result of North Korea withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003. Five rounds of talks from 2003 to 2007 produced little net progress until the third phase of the fifth round of talks, when North Korea agreed to shut down its nuclear facilities in exchange for fuel aid and steps towards the normalization of relations with the United States. However, there were internal issues that doomed the talks on several occasions. The early years of the talks, North Korea was undergoing a flirtation with succession politics. Ko Yong-hui, Kim's fourth wife/mistress was pushing her oldest son, Kim Jong-chol, forward as heir apparent. Elements of the military supported the move and pressed for testing of critical defense systems as a legitimacy-building exercise. While these forces were pushed back by Kim following Ko's death in 2004, they were resurrected in 2006 in the midst of rumors of Kim's failing health. This overlapped with an internal forecast of economic stability, a prerequisite for any decision to test and absorb the inevitable international backlash. Throughout the spring of 2006, North Korea signaled that it was willing to return to the Six Party Talks if the United States lifted the BDA sanctions and held bilateral meetings. Its frustration grew as its signals met with silence from Washington. The missile test came only a month after a North Korean invitation for the United States to send its nuclear envoy to Pyongyang for bilateral talks, a move that was rebuffed. When the missile test failed to achieve the desired results, Pyongyang upped the ante in October with the

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<sup>32</sup> According to some Pyongyang watchers, Kim Jong-il harbored many reservations about his own regime's policies. He told South Korea's Hyundai Group founder Chung Chu-yung he wanted to learn about the New Communities movement that military dictator Park Chung-hee had employed in laying the foundation for South Korea's largely successful market economy. In an article in the January 4, 2001 issue of *Rodong Sinmun* entitled "The Twenty-First Century is a Century of Gigantic Change and Creation," Kim appeared to signal the implementation of a far-reaching reform policy. This was followed by a trip to China in which Kim was rumored to have told his subordinates, "China has succeeded in economic reforms. Why have we failed?" See Bradley Martin, *Under the Loving Care of the Fatherly Leader* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2006).

<sup>33</sup> One of the myths that U.S. policymakers have regarding North Korea is that it always cheats on agreements. Actually, the record is somewhat mixed. According to one assessment:

"The first nuclear agreement between the United States and North Korea collapsed in 2002 after eight years in force, in part because of cheating by Pyongyang, but it did head off a nuclear weapons program that could have produced as many as 100 bombs. A nuclear deal brokered by China in 2005 requiring Pyongyang to give up its weapons program faltered after the Bush administration imposed new economic sanctions on the North before the ink was dry. A U.S.-North Korean deal in 2012 that imposed a moratorium on the North's long-range rocket tests collapsed when Pyongyang claimed its rockets intended to launch satellites into space were exempted, not a minor point since those tests could help develop nuclear-tipped missiles. Outside the WMD arena, the record is also mixed. For example, after private aid organizations began delivery of 100,000 tons of food assistance to the North in 2008, while most of the assistance reached its intended destinations, they discovered that a small amount had disappeared. On the other hand, aid groups engaged in local projects to help increase food production found the North abided by its agreements." See Joel Witt and Jenny Town, "It's Not a Hermit Kingdom, and 4 Other Myths About North Korea," *The Atlantic Online*, 29 March 2013.



nuclear test, agreed to return to the Six Party Talks, and declared 2007 to be the “year of economic development.”

A cursory examination of North Korean media pronouncements over the course of the first eight months of 2008 painted the picture of a regime that was again unclear about the way forward. According to North Korean officials, the regime was increasingly frustrated by the slow pace of promised aid and increasingly concerned with the changing ground rules regarding sanctions. In the July round of the Six Party Talks, the parties agreed in principle to establish a verification and monitoring mechanism as well as a more precise timetable so that fuel oil assistance and disablement could take place in parallel. However, the United States made removal of North Korea from the list of state sponsors of terrorism contingent on an initial verification protocol. By August, a stalemate had taken over the process, with North Korea refusing to budge on verification and the United States not moving on delisting. In September, Pyongyang expelled the IAEA inspectors, halted the disablement process of its nuclear facilities, and threatened to restart the Yongbyon reactor.<sup>34</sup>

It is hard to argue that a deeper understanding of North Korea’s calculus could have had a profound impact on how both the Clinton and Bush administrations handled the relationship with Pyongyang. A more nuanced understanding of North Korean internal dynamics might have allowed U.S. policymakers to identify areas of tactical leverage to push forward relations with Pyongyang. But given the narrow range of U.S. objectives for its North Korea policy (i.e., addressing the nuclear issue), it probably would have had a limited effect. At most one could argue that a lack of this knowledge appears to have led to several uninformed assumptions that evolved within the policymaking community regarding North Korean regime dynamics.<sup>35</sup>

## Obama’s North Korea Policy

*“Everybody is trying to sort of read the tea leaves [on North Korea] as to what is happening and what is likely to occur, and there is a lot of guessing going on...But there is also an increasing amount of pressure because if there is a succession, even if it's a peaceful succession, that creates more uncertainty and it may also encourage behaviors that are even more provocative as a way to consolidate power within the society.”*

Hillary Clinton, Secretary of State, in Seoul, February 19, 2009

*“I think we’ve said many times that the leadership and how decisions are made in North Korea is an opaque process....Who’s actually taking decisions is very opaque as well. We don’t have any direct contact on the ground and are not able to well judge what we hear coming out of North Korea.”*

Gordon Duguid, State Department Spokesman, February 19, 2009

As the new Obama administration took office, it faced several challenges on the Korean Peninsula. In addition to the ongoing dispute over Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program, there were indications of another possible famine in the North. For reasons that were unclear, North Korea was pushing for the

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<sup>34</sup> Ken E. Gause, *North Korea Under Kim Chong-il: Power, Politics, and Prospects for Change*, op. cit.

<sup>35</sup> The fact that U.S. policy failed to gain traction with North Korea does not mean that deep knowledge of North Korea’s calculus was absent within the U.S. government. There is no doubt that the intelligence community had a sophisticated understanding of the issues. But, it does not appear that this knowledge found purchase in policy discussions, or was outweighed by other considerations.

removal of outsiders from the Kaesong special economic zone, thereby further isolating the regime from needed international assistance.<sup>36</sup> Military coordination between the two Koreas had been cut off and there were no attempts by the North to further comply with former agreements with the South or to continue construction of a promised inter-Korean railroad.

Surrounding all of these challenges was a possible succession crisis brewing in Pyongyang. In August 2008, Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke, leaving him unable to perform his duties of running the day-to-day affairs of the regime. If some follow-up reports were to be believed, he may have suffered another stroke in October and become incapacitated, though the outside world could not confirm these reports. If a power vacuum had emerged, a succession struggle might have already begun and the leadership dynamics within the regime could change dramatically. This could lead to many false assumptions that could undermine any short-term strategies to deal with North Korea in the post-Kim period.

Kim Jong-il returned to the public arena by the time President Obama took oath. At the beginning of the Obama administration's first term in 2009, there were expectations that the United States might pursue direct talks with North Korea in order to break a two decade-long standoff over its nuclear program. President Obama promised in his inaugural address that he would offer an outstretched hand to those who would unclench their fists, making a public offer to dictatorial states of willingness to abandon adversarial relations. However, it did not take long for North Korea's seemingly aggressive actions to turn the new administration's hopeful intentions into deep cynical frustration.

- North Korea responded to this offer with a multi-stage rocket launch and nuclear tests in April and May of 2009. As a consequence, decision-making within the Obama administration began to shift from engagement to upholding the international non-proliferation regime. The resulting UNSC Resolution 1874 condemned North Korea's nuclear and multi-stage rocket tests and subjected suspected North Korean nuclear-related shipments to international inspections. Following a UN condemnation of a failed missile launch in April, North Korea declared it would pull out of the Six Party Talks and that it would resume its nuclear enrichment program in order to boost its nuclear deterrent.<sup>37</sup>
- Politics inside Washington prevented the Obama administration from returning to its engagement strategy. Instead, a policy of "strategic patience" began to characterize the president's actions toward North Korea. Critical to this policy approach was an emphasis on alliance coordination and a focus on denuclearization. This strategy also rested on assumptions that North Korea's provocations would lead to damaging self-isolation from its immediate neighbors, that enhanced efforts by the administration to engage with North Korea would not result in requisite political benefits and could expose the administration to great political risk.
- The strategy of "strategic patience" appeared to align with the realities of dynamics around the Korean Peninsula in 2010 when North Korea suddenly struck out with two violent provocations:

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<sup>36</sup> North Korea appeared to be undertaking a reassessment of its economic policy. In early 2009, many of North Korea's economic functionaries were replaced, including: Ho Taek (Minister of Power Industry), Kim Chang-sik (Minister of Agriculture), and Kim Taebong (Minister of Metal Industry). These appointments followed North Korea's authoritative New Year's message, which signaled a major effort to tighten social discipline and reassert greater control over economic activity, apparently with an eye to revitalizing key economic sectors, suggesting the leadership intended to get the economy moving again in preparation for the 2012 centennial of the birth of Kim Il-sung. There was some speculation that Jang Song-taek, Kim Jong-il's brother-in-law was crafting a new economic policy.

<sup>37</sup> "DPRK Foreign Ministry Vehemently Refutes UNSC's 'Presidential Statement'." KCNA, 14 April 2009.

the sinking of the *Cheonan* in March and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island in November. But, ironically, it was during this period where leadership analysis began to have more resonance inside U.S. policymaking circles. This was likely driven by concerns about stability inside the regime. U.S. intelligence (according to media reports) concluded that these provocations were in part due to problems with the succession process tied to the failed currency revaluation and the need to bolster the leadership credentials of the new heir apparent, Kim Jong-un. This conclusion, combined with the revelations from Stanford University scientist Siegfried Hecker that North Korean efforts to enrich uranium and construct a light water reactor were making steady progress, led the Obama administration to embark on three rounds of direct talks with North Korean counterparts from July 2011 to February 2012, which culminated in the ill-fated "Leap Day Agreement".

- The United States intended its second attempt at engagement to bind North Korea from provocative actions such as nuclear and missile tests and to secure Pyongyang's commitment to return to the path of denuclearization. In April, on the eve of the one hundredth anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth, North Korea conducted a failed launch of satellite/missile test. Frustration with the ease and alacrity that Pyongyang walked away from the February deal sealed the view in minds of many within the Obama administration that the North Korean regime was a hopeless case. While it would continue to adhere to its commitment of coordination with regional allies in pursuit of North Korean denuclearization, strategic patience gave way to a return to benign neglect.

The fundamental U.S. strategy of dealing with North Korea, namely pursuing strong alliance relations with South Korea and maintaining a firm commitment to denuclearization as the opening gambit to any further, formal negotiations, continued into Obama's second term. The change in administrations in Seoul from Lee Myung-bak to Park Geun-hye and the unveiling of "Trust Politik" was embraced by Washington. The United States supported South Korea's tentative attempts at engagement with the North. The Park administration, although the contours of its inter-Korean policy remained vague, was consistent in its insistence on the need for Pyongyang to take concrete steps toward denuclearization.

## Benefits and Costs of the Obama Policy

The U.S. policy toward North Korea in many respects made sense. President Obama declared in his second inaugural address, "We will show the courage to try and resolve our differences with other nations peacefully — not because we are naive about the dangers we face but because engagement can more durably lift suspicion and fear." With regard to North Korea, the Obama administration laid out its terms and gave every indication that if Pyongyang would agree to those terms, which included placing its nuclear program on the table, the United States would be willing to engage and negotiate in good faith.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Skeptics of the strategic patience strategy note that it seemed plausible and reasonable because the United States never said it would not negotiate with North Korea, merely that it insisted on preconditions to ensure that the talks were fruitful and productive. The device is quite a simple one. If you do not want negotiations with the other side, but do not want to appear to reject talks as such, you merely insist on preconditions that you know the other side will not, and cannot, accept. Negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang are essentially about Washington dropping its policy of hostility and accepting peaceful co-existence in exchange for Pyongyang giving up nuclear weapons. The more cynical of the critics go further to ascribe a more strategic motive to U.S. intransigence, noting that Pyongyang's nuclear program provides the United States with an excuse to boost its military presence to counter the rise of China and to reinforce the three-way security pact with South Korea and Japan.

The problem was this policy was fundamentally flawed. While the United States stood aside, hoping time and circumstances would force North Korea to accede to demands for denuclearization, the North forged ahead with its own plans:

- When North Korea launched a missile in the spring of 2009, Washington pushed for U.N. sanctions. Barely a month after that resolution passed, Pyongyang staged its second nuclear test.
- As the Obama administration followed a policy of “strategic patience” and minimal diplomatic movement, Pyongyang then revealed that it had acquired a uranium enrichment capability to go along with its plutonium bomb program.
- North Korea’s December 2012 missile test led to a condemnation from the U.N. Security Council. That prompted Pyongyang to conduct its third nuclear test in February, which in turn produced even tougher U.N.-mandated sanctions.
- Reports in 2015 suggest that North Korea might have attempted to restart the plutonium production reactor at Yongbyon after a shutdown of almost five months.<sup>39</sup>

Strategic patience in the end created a surreal stalemate between two countries that had dug in their heels. Attempts at bridging this divide detoured into the bizarre as was the case when Kim Jong-un used Dennis Rodman to pass a message to President Obama about his desire to talk, an offer that barely warranted a response. It also led to inflamed tensions on both sides that sprang up from time to time, in either rhetoric or more aggressive forms, such as a cyber-attack aimed at stopping the release of a movie in 2014. Not only had relations between the two countries reached a low point, they now existed in a parallel universe where the decorum and rules of foreign policy no longer applied.

## **Internal North Korean Politics: Stymying U.S. Policy**

While it is easy to blame U.S. North Korea policy for its lack of leverage and occasional missteps, an equal share of responsibility for the Obama administration’s lack of success on North Korea resided not in Washington, but in Pyongyang. An examination of the politics surrounding the succession of Kim Jong-un suggests that any strategy (by the United States or other regional states) short of caving to Pyongyang’s demands would have been met with pushback and outright rejection. In short, the Kim Jong-un regime was not ready for serious engagement on anything but its own terms. Acceptance of external offers to engage carried too much risk. This was due to ongoing dynamics inside the regime.

### **Killing the Leap Day Deal**

Much of the Obama administration’s frustration with North Korea originally came from the collapse of the Leap Day deal following Pyongyang’s decision to test fire a long-range Unha-3 missile on April 13, 2012.

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<sup>39</sup> North Korea began operating the reactor in 1985 and agreed to freeze the facility under an agreement reached with the United States in exchange for international aid. It restarted the reactor in 2002 before it was disabled in 2007 under an aid-for-disarmament accord at the Six Party Talks, but renovations began again after Pyongyang conducted its nuclear test in 2013.

From Washington's point of view, this was callous and suggested that the new Kim Jong-un regime had no interest in serious engagement and could not be trusted to follow through on agreements.

From Pyongyang's view, the reasoning and calculations were very different. Kim Jong-il had died in December, and April would mark the 100th anniversary of Kim Il-sung's birth. Indications are that preparations for the April 15th celebration had been established while Kim Jong-il was alive, a very potent reason for his young successor to place tremendous importance on showing progress on one of the country's critical defense systems to mark the occasion. In addition, the first phase of the transition of power was underway and the power dynamics were still in flux. It was a hazy period and power dynamics were tied to players from a variety of different constituencies, something that is not surprising given how Kim Jong-un's father ran the regime. There were members of the old guard who had been close to Kim Jong-il, such as Kim Ki-nam, Choe Tae-bok, Kim Yong-nam, Kim Yong-chun, and O Kuk-ryol. Another group had begun their rise in the period when Kim Jong-un was being ensconced as the heir apparent—people such as Ri Yong-ho, Kim Jong-gak, and U Tong-chuk. Yet another group was made up of members of the Kim family, such as Kim Kyong-hui and Jang Song-taek.

For Kim Jong-un to do anything other than adhere to the script laid down by his father would have been to risk undermining his position within the regime. Although he quickly secured the titles of power, he lacked the relationships and knowledge of the levers of power to bend the regime to his will.

## **Who is Kim Jong-un?**

The precarious situation in which Kim Jong-un found himself was reflected by the apparent contradictions surrounding the missile launch. The launch itself seemed to be in keeping with the Military First Policy. However, as the missile exploded and fell to earth seconds after takeoff, it was followed immediately by an unprecedented announcement that the launch had been a failure, a move that raised questions in the outside world about whether change inside the regime might be afoot. A few days later in his first public speech, Kim Jong-un raised more questions when he stressed that there would be “no more belt tightening”, perceived to be possible code for some sort of economic reform.

Pyongyang watchers inside the U.S. administration and the intelligence communities of its allies were perplexed. Conferences and roundtables in Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul reflected continuing debates inside governments. Some saw little change. Kim Jong-un was still the Supreme Leader of a totalitarian regime. The question was not whether he was a reformer or an autocrat—he was the latter, since the system could not tolerate anything other than a one-man system. On the contrary, the question was whether he truly held the reins of power or was subject to countervailing forces inside the regime. Others, however, saw Kim's initial moves as a possible indication that he might be a different leader from his father and grandfather, perhaps with more potential for negotiation.

This debate coincided with the second phase of the transition of power inside North Korea, which began in the summer of 2012. Over the months, many of the players from the first phase faded into the background, where they were demoted or purged. It was during this period that the uniformed officers who accompanied Kim Jong-il's hearse disappeared from the front lines. Kim Yong-chun was removed from his position as Minister of People's Armed Forces to become the director of the KWP Civil Defense Department. U Tong-

chuk, first vice director of the Ministry of State Security, disappeared for reasons that are still unclear. Kim Jong-gak was made Minister of People's Armed Forces and then removed and made head of Kim Il-sung Military University. Ri Yong-ho, the powerful Chief of the General Staff, was purged. In this period, the Kim family came to the fore. Choe Ryong-hae also began his rise, becoming a member of the Politburo Presidium and vice chairman of the Central Military Commission.

By late 2012 and early 2013, the inner circle around Kim Jong-un had come into focus. This was the so-called "regent structure". It was composed of three regents—Kim Kyong-hui, Jang Song-taek, and Choe Ryong-hae—who served as the gatekeepers, ensured Kim's situational awareness, assisted him in developing critical relationships, and guided his decision-making. Each regent had his own functional responsibilities and influence.

During this period, Washington policymakers watched in confusion as the Kim regime promoted economic technocrats, such as Pak Pong-ju to positions of prominence and announced a package of modest reforms in June 2012. This was followed by the removal of the Chief of the General Staff, Ri Yong-ho, and a series of high-profile reshuffles of the high command. Just as voices of engagement began to rise again within certain segments of the Pyongyang-watching community, North Korea tested another missile and conducted a nuclear test in February 2013. Within weeks of new sanctions taking effect, North Korea lashed out at the joint U.S.-ROK military drills (Foil Eagle/Key Resolve) in March and April 2013. Kim's regime moved up the escalatory ladder (at least rhetorically) with a boldness and pace not seen under his father. Pyongyang abrogated the Armistice agreement and shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex. It threatened nuclear strikes against the United States. While the escalation soon died down after the end of the joint military exercises and North Korea quickly embarked on a charm/ diplomatic offensive, the view inside Washington was one of bewilderment. Strategic patience appeared to be the right policy. The view that China would keep this erratic regime in check, while questioned in some quarters, remained a predominant belief inside the Washington policymaking community.

## **The Last Straw Breaks**

Even though North Korea embarked on a diplomatic outreach campaign in the summer of 2013, the likelihood that it could seriously follow through on any U.S. offers of engagement was almost non-existent. It had entered into the third phase of power transition, which was based on two critical goals: 1) securing external economic aid in amounts to jump-start the economy and 2) deal with a rapidly unfolding situation at the upper reaches of the leadership. The United States and its insistence on tangible steps toward denuclearization provided no path to success from Pyongyang's perspective.

North Korea made diplomatic overtures to both Seoul and Tokyo. While the inter-Korean signals were understandable, the Pyongyang-Tokyo dialogue was new. Why would Kim Jong-un agree to serious discussions on the abduction issue when his father would inevitably be implicated? The dialogue seemed to be a move of desperation designed to do two things: 1) provide an additional source of aid to supplement that coming from China and, more importantly, 2) place pressure on Seoul to deal with North Korea more on its own terms. The fact that Prime Minister Abe was in a strong political position, Pyongyang's estimation that he could deliver on the first objective seemed sound, and the fact that Japan was also seeking to pressure Seoul made the second appear to be a win-win situation. The primary driver behind North

Korea's strategy was the need for quick infusions of external funding tied to a final push by Kim Jong-un at power consolidation.

Inside the North Korean leadership, a number of power struggles were escalating in 2013. Some were tied to long-term competition for resources and power while others were more recent manifestations of Jang Song-taek's empire-building. One model often discussed is the competition between powerful groups wrestling for power and access to hard currency operations. Jang and his allies had been in a fierce political battle with the powerful KWP Organization Guidance Department since the early 2000s. Jang also had his battles with the high command, whose assets he had been raiding since he became vice chairman of the NDC in 2010. He also apparently had his fingerprints on several high-level purges within the internal security apparatus, an apparatus he oversaw in his capacity as director of the KWP Administrative Department. The result was the coalescing of forces within the regime against the powerful defacto number-two man in the regime.

While this model reflected much of the tension inside the regime in 2013, it was only part of the story—there was also tension within the Kim family. Kim Kyong-hui's illness was speeding up the clock. According to some sources, her illness had led to an investigation of Jang's activities, which yielded insights into his business improprieties and empire-building. In the last months of his life, Kim Jong-il had warned his sister that Jang Song-taek's continued survival in the political arena could create another center of influence that would complicate Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power. As a consequence, in the summer 2013, the Kim family (probably Kim Jong-un and Kim Kyong-hui) began building a file on Jang Song-taek that would be used to justify his purge. The file emerged out of a task force investigation led by the Organization Guidance Department. The report was completed in October or November and after signing off on the report, Kim Jong-un launched the purge that eventually led to Jang's execution on December 12. A few weeks later, Kim signed an order for the internal security apparatus to begin the clamp down on the Jang network.

Jang's purge shocked the world. Models on how the North Korean regime worked were invalidated overnight. Beijing was angry and frustrated by the turn of events and the United States view of China's relationship with its erstwhile ally was called into question.<sup>40</sup> One of the fundamental planks of the strategic patience policy—China's ability to exert influence on North Korea—was shattered. As 2014 unfolded, little changed to give the Obama administration hope on the North Korea account. Pyongyang's release of Kenneth Bae and other Americans being held for various offenses found little purchase in Washington policymaking circles. The turnover in the diplomats responsible for the North Korea policy led to some fine tuning of the U.S. message regarding engagement, but the basic ingredients of the strategic patience strategy remained in place.

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<sup>40</sup> Jang Song-taek oversaw the China portfolio for the regime. He was close to many Chinese leaders and some suggest he was "Beijing's man in Pyongyang."

# North Korea Makes One Last Push

For the last two years of the Obama administration, North Korea continued to look for diplomatic openings, but found little purchase. Two of the more high-profile initiatives the regime undertook involved rather aggressive actions, one to protect the integrity of the leader and the other the reset the inter-Korean relationship, both in the service of diplomacy.

## “The Interview”

In the early 2000s, Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg conceived of a plot for a comic take on the assassination of a world leader. It originally intended to focus on North Korea and its leader, Kim Jong-il. The project was put on hold until Kim Jong-il’s death in 2011, after which it was resurrected under the working title “Kill Kim Jong-un”.<sup>41</sup> Rogan and Goldberg took the idea to a number of friends and advisors to enquire whether such a movie should be made about a specific living person, as opposed to a caricature. The consensus was that a living subject would make the movie “more interesting and funnier”.<sup>42</sup> Although the title was later changed to “The 45 Interview”, it represented the first movie ever with a plot centered on the fictional assassination of a sitting leader.<sup>43</sup>

In June 2014, the North Korean regime took notice of the movie, which was scheduled for release at the end of the year. The state-run Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) threatened a "merciless" response against the United States unless it banned "The Interview". Officials called the film an "act of war".<sup>44</sup> Several months later, on November 22, Sony officials noticed that the company's computer system had been compromised when skulls appeared on employees' screens with a message threatening to expose "secrets" from data obtained in a sophisticated hack. Initially, the company said it was dealing with an "IT matter", but later acknowledged the hack to staff, calling it a "brazen attack" comprised of "malicious criminal acts".

An unknown group calling itself #GOP—later identified as Guardians of Peace—claimed it was behind the cyberattack, prompting the FBI to launch an investigation. Their name was subsequently attached to leaks of information. Speculation mounted that North Korea may have had a hand in the attack. Pyongyang eventually denied involvement, but heaped praise on the hack, calling it a "righteous deed". As for the movie, its debut was delayed, but after consultations with U.S. officials, Sony went ahead with the release

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<sup>41</sup> Shelli Weinstein, “Seth Rogen: Censoring North Korea in ‘The Interview’ ‘Seemed Wrong,’ *Variety*, 15 February 2015.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> “Team America” also involved the assassination of Kim Jong-il, but all the actors were puppets.

<sup>44</sup> KCNA website, Pyongyang, in English 25 June 2014.



through various media. This was followed by the mysterious collapse of North Korean Internet sites caused by sustained electronic attacks that crippled the country's internet infrastructure.<sup>45</sup>

Pyongyang's rhetoric surrounding the Sony cyberattack was reminiscent of past incidents in which the regime sought to claim credit for a provocation while at the same time avoiding blame to control escalation. Through such a covert approach to managing the escalation ladder, North Korea was able to demonstrate its asymmetric capabilities while retaining the possibility of North-South engagement, which was a fundamental goal of the Kim Jong-un regime.

Ambiguous denial has been part and parcel of North Korea's provocation strategy over the years. It was on display as Pyongyang handled the fallout of the *Cheonan* attack, as well as with several suspected cyberattacks in 2011 and 2013 against South Korean banks and media outlets. However, in those instances, the regime's need for ambiguity was couched in its desire not to be perceived by the international community as acting outside the boundaries of "fair play". In other words, the regime had no defense for its actions, which were offensive in nature and largely tied to internal politics inside the regime. Even though internally it could often rationalize these attacks as being retaliatory, the regime knew it could not win in the court of public opinion and if revealed, North Korea could conceivably lose the support of its patrons—China and Russia—on the UN Security Council and suffer at the hands of Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo.

The calculus behind the 2014 Sony attack was different. Since May 2013, immediately following the end of the March/April 2013 crisis, North Korea had been engaged in a diplomatic campaign across the region in search of international aid. This campaign began with Seoul and Washington and later was extended to Tokyo and Moscow. Pyongyang's desire was to weaken the regime's reliance on Chinese aid and ultimately increase pressure on South Korea to drop its demands on the nuclear program and provide North Korea with access to its economy in a manner reminiscent of the Sunshine era.<sup>46</sup> In the middle of this "charm campaign", news of this movie that smeared the reputation of the Supreme Leader began to filter into the regime. With Kim Jong-un still working to consolidate his power, such an international attack on his image could not go without a response. Unlike the *Cheonan* affair, North Korea now felt that it was on much more solid ground in its outrage. After all, this was not about retribution for the military for a lost ship; this was the international community, unprovoked, using a movie to make light of the Supreme Leader. However, while North Korea could express its anger, its diplomatic campaign tied the regime's hands in how it could respond. Sinking another ship or lashing out along the NLL would only bring international condemnation, additional sanctions, and undermine any chances of securing vital international aid. Covert measures of a less lethal variety were called for to send a provocative signal that would obscure the perpetrator, thus blunting any response.

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<sup>45</sup> The networks are not considered especially robust since they rely on a single provider, China United Network Communications Group Co. Ltd., the state-owned provider in neighboring China. North Korea's service was sporadic starting Saturday, December 20, and then collapsed entirely for nearly 10 hours two days later. The United States provided no comment on whether it was behind the attacks.

<sup>46</sup> Allegedly Kim Jong-il in his last will and testament counseled his son to find a way to link into the South Korean economic engine in order to realize the "strong and prosperous nation", which would be vital to Kim Jong-un's consolidation of power.

On December 7, a spokesperson from the NDC's Policy Department criticized the charges that North Korea had carried out the hacking operation as "false rumor" and "wild". While the regime refused to take responsibility, its outrage stopped well short of a categorical denial. However, in order to maintain its message of possible complicity, Pyongyang resorted to an unprecedented tactic of hinting that as part of a "just struggle" against the United States, "supporters and sympathizers" of the regime were likely involved. This allowed North Korea to firmly link the actions of the Guardians of Peace to "The Interview", something that had not been explicit before the NDC message since the GOP had not mentioned the movie.

## August DMZ Crisis

On August 4, 2015, two South Korean soldiers were severely injured after triggering landmines planted near a South Korean guard post along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). After a United Nations-led investigation, South Korea attributed the attack to North Korea, claiming North Korean operators had planted the mines sometime between July 22 and August 4.<sup>47</sup> As part of South Korea's retaliation strategy, on August 10, Seoul deployed loudspeakers to broadcast anti-North Korean propaganda across the DMZ.<sup>48</sup> South Korea had not used loudspeakers as a retaliatory tactic since 2004. North Korea threatened to target the loudspeakers. On August 19, South Korean forces detected artillery fire in the direction of the loudspeakers and returned fire.<sup>49,50</sup> On August 20, Kim Jong-un convened an emergency meeting of the Central Military Commission, after which North Korea ordered its military into a "semi-war" state and threatened direct strikes against South Korean propaganda loudspeakers unless they were stopped by 17:00 on August 22.

On August 22, four U.S. F-16s and four South Korean F-15Ks flew in a combat drill, with the chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff for the U.S. and South Korea affirming a strong response to any North Korean

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<sup>47</sup> United States Forces Korea, "United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission Investigates land mine detonation in demilitarized zone," United States Forces Korea, August 13, 2015, <http://www.usfk.mil/Media/PressReleases/tabid/12661/Article/613531/united-nations-command-military-armistice-commission-investigates-land-mine-det.aspx>.

<sup>48</sup> The landmine attack was a violent break with North Korea's diplomatic posture. It was the first time during Kim Jong-un's rule that a kinetic, direct attack had caused South Korean casualties on the peninsula. As with the Sony hack, the crisis was likely initiated by North Korea's Special Forces. North Korean operators, likely under the purview of the RGB, operated clandestinely to place the landmines along known ROK patrol routes of the DMZ. The origin of the attack was ambiguous enough to afford the North Koreans plausible deniability, allowing them to cast South Korea as the escalatory actor when Seoul retaliated. The intensity of the kinetic attack was below the threshold for triggering a combined military response from the United States and ROK.

<sup>49</sup> "North Korea and South Korea Trade Fire Across Border, Seoul Says." *The New York Times*. August 20, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/world/asia/north-korea-and-south-korea-exchange-rocket-and-artillery-fire.html>

<sup>50</sup> According to some sources, it is debatable whether North Korea actually fired artillery across the DMZ, and that the South Koreans were mistaken.

attack.<sup>51</sup> The 17:00 deadline for the cessation of loudspeaker broadcasts passed, with no additional actions by the North Koreans. At 18:00, the North and South agreed to hold talks, which began on August 23.<sup>52</sup>

During the talks, both sides appeared to reinforce aggressive postures. North Korea increased the number of artillery near the DMZ and dispatched 70% of its submarines from their ports. South Korean president Park Geun-hye issued a statement saying there would be “no backing down” and demanded a clear apology from North Korea for the landmine incident.<sup>53</sup> Talks continued until August 25, at which point an agreement was reached to end the immediate standoff. North Korea would stand down its semi-war force posture, and the South Koreans would cease the propaganda broadcasts by 12:00. North Korea expressed regret for the landmine incident but denied culpability.<sup>54</sup>

The two sides arranged to hold talks on family reunions and agreed to hold more extensive talks in December 2015. South Korean Pyongyang-watchers report that following the crisis, North Korea reached out to the United States via back channels to conduct negotiations. However, their outreach was rebuffed by the United States, which maintained its policy of denuclearization as a precondition for engagement.<sup>55</sup>

The August 2015 crisis is an outlier in Kim Jong-un’s interactions with the outside world. It is the only time that the regime has resorted to violence in pursuit of its foreign and security policy. Some Pyongyang-watchers have compared it to the violence of 2010, but the internal dynamics do not support such comparisons. It was not a spasm from inside the regime caused by power plays or instability. While the reasoning is tied to politics inside the regime, its motivation is less strident. Ultimately, Kim likely manufactured the crisis as a last ditch effort to restart inter-Korean negotiations. By escalating to de-escalate, a time-honored North Korean strategy, he hoped to change Seoul’s calculus and lay the foundation for the international assistance he needed to bolster his legitimacy going into the 7th Party Congress in May 2016. Up until this point, his power consolidation had been based on purges. Without any major breakthroughs on aid or financial assistance, Kim Jong-un had little to show for the economic track of his signature *Byungjin* policy.<sup>56</sup> The 7th Party Congress was to be a “coronation”, the official beginning of the

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<sup>51</sup> Sam Kim, Sangwon Yoon, and Tony Capaccio, “U.S., South Korea Scramble Fighter Jets in Show of Force to Kim,” *The Washington Post*, August 22, 2015, original article available for Bloomberg Terminal subscribers at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-21/u-s-backs-ally-s-korea-s-rejection-of-kim-jong-un-s-ultimatum>.

<sup>52</sup> Stephan Haggard, “The Crisis on the Korean Peninsula and Its Surprising Resolution,” *Lawfare*, 26 August 2015.

<sup>53</sup> Sang-hun Choe, “North Korea Moves Forces Amid Talks With South,” *The New York Times*, August 23, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/24/world/asia/with-force-deployments-north-korea-raises-stakes-of-talks-with-south.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/24/world/asia/with-force-deployments-north-korea-raises-stakes-of-talks-with-south.html?_r=0)

<sup>54</sup> “Koreas Agree on Deal to Defuse Tensions,” *The New York Times*, August 24, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/25/world/asia/south-korea-vows-not-to-back-down-in-military-standoff-with-north.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Author’s discussions in Seoul, South Korea, July 2017.

<sup>56</sup> The timing of the landmine attack was significant. By August 2015, Kim Jong-un had been pursuing a two-year diplomatic charm campaign to secure aid from China, Japan, and Russia. If North Korea was going to use violence in order to force Seoul to the negotiating table, it would have to tie it to a period of tension on the peninsula. Ulchi Freedom Guardian, the joint U.S.-ROK military exercise, created such tension since North Korea viewed such exercises as threatening. It was the first opportunity since Pyongyang’s final attempt at diplomacy (with Moscow) fell through in April (2015).

Kim Jong-un period.<sup>57</sup> This lack of demonstrable economic progress reflected poorly on Kim's leadership. Unable to lean on economic improvement for his legitimacy, Kim had to turn to national security to burnish his leadership credentials. When the August crisis failed to resurrect the diplomatic track, Kim was left with little choice but to turn to brinkmanship.

## Kim's Coronation in a Period of Escalation

It is wrong to assume that the nuclear program was in stasis during the diplomatic charm campaign. Rather, North Korea's policy was dual track, showcasing one side of *Byungjin* while keeping the other under wraps—in other words, the nuclear program was still moving forward, even though its tests were not public. As such, the need for testing in both the missile and nuclear programs was becoming more pressing. As the failure of the diplomatic charm campaign became apparent, voices within the regime urging operational testing appeared to multiply. At the end of December 2015, KCNA announced the death of Kim Yang-gon, the director of the KWP United Front Department and the architect of the charm campaign.<sup>58</sup> He was replaced by Kim Yong-chol, the former head of the Reconnaissance General Bureau, a noted hardliner and close adviser to Kim Jong-un. A few days later, North Korea pivoted to a new course that it would follow for the next two years.

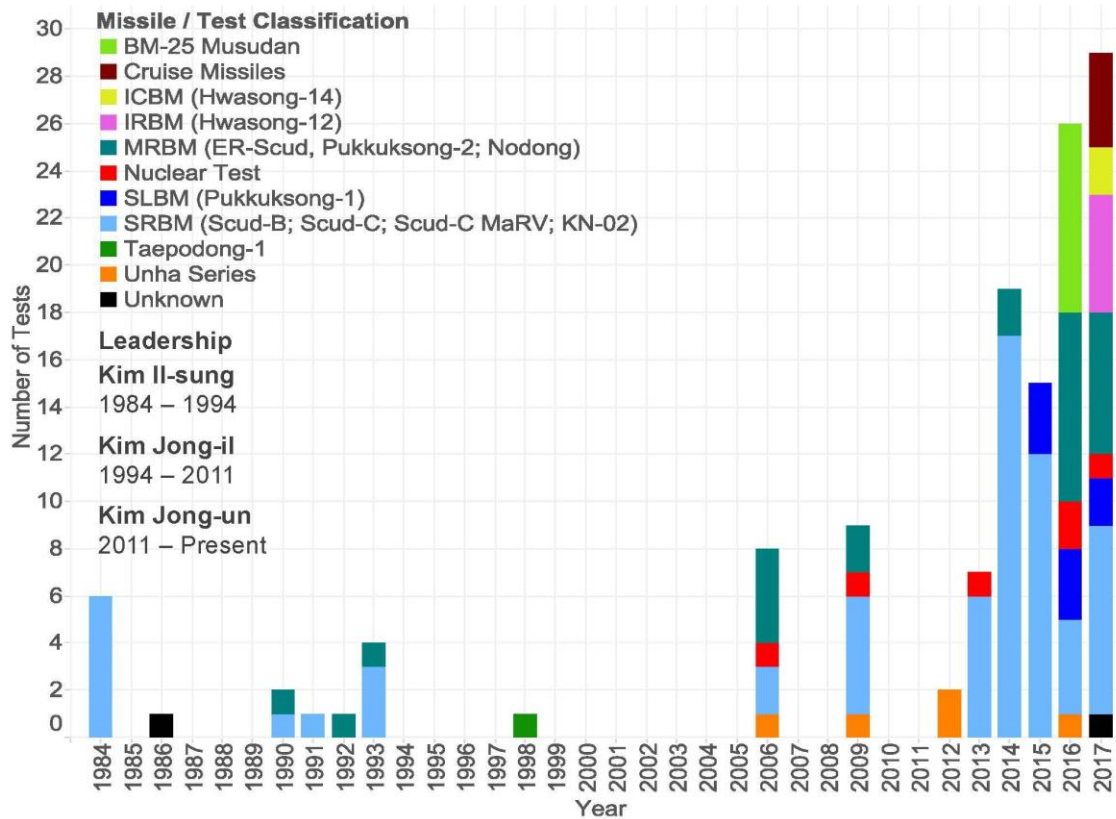
The years 2016-2017 saw North Korea's fourth, fifth, and sixth nuclear tests, and a notable increase in the number of North Korea's missile tests. The number of missile tests in 2016 was the highest since 1984, and almost equivalent to the total number of tests from both the Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il eras combined (see Figure 5 – 26 tests in 2016, 33 total from 1984 to 2011.) In July 2017, North Korea conducted two ICBM tests, followed closely by the sixth nuclear test in September 2017.

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<sup>57</sup> Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea's Party Congress Explained: A Coronation for Kim Jong-un," *The New York Times*, May 5, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/06/world/asia/north-korea-congress.html>.

<sup>58</sup> "Kim Yang Gon Dies," Korean Central News Agency 30 December 2015.

Figure 5. North Korean Missile and Nuclear Tests, by year



Source: CNA

In the midst of this testing, North Korea convened the 7th Party Congress in May (2016), the first Party Congress since 1980, when Kim Jong-il was announced to the world as Kim Il-sung’s heir apparent. At the Congress, Kim Jong-un was appointed Chairman of the Korean Workers’ Party.<sup>59</sup> On the surface, this would appear to be nothing more than another title, replacing his title of First Secretary. In the culture of North Korean politics, however, the title of Chairman conveyed Kim’s elevation to a position that put his policy pronouncements beyond question, quieting the space around Kim as the Supreme Leader. No opposition would be tolerated and only advice requested directly by the Leader would be accepted. Kim delivered a three-hour report on the work of the Party Central Committee, a practice that has been in place since the first Congress in 1946.<sup>60</sup> The length and structure of the report were apparently patterned after Kim Il-sung’s report to the 6th Party Congress in 1980.<sup>61</sup> This suggested that Kim was trying to establish himself

<sup>59</sup> Kim Il-sung, who ruled the totalitarian regime from 1948 until his death in 1994, used the title of chairman of the Workers' Party before he scrapped the title in 1966.

<sup>60</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, 8 May 2016.

<sup>61</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, 11 October 1980.

as a leader in his own right, while carefully managing the distance between himself and his predecessors' legacies.<sup>62</sup>

Kim reiterated his commitment to his trademark “simultaneous line” on nuclear and economic development but did not disavow denuclearization altogether or claim nuclear weapons development would proceed indefinitely, as harsher regime pronouncements had in the past. His rhetoric on unqualified respect for nonproliferation norms was slightly more positive than the regime’s standing line. Kim’s brief mention of nuclear weapons issues tracked with past speeches. With the exception of his March 2013 “simultaneous” line speech,<sup>63</sup> Kim’s public addresses have to date avoided discussing nuclear weapons policy in detail.

In hindsight, Kim’s speech foreshadowed the regime’s strategy toward the end of 2017 and into 2018. However, before getting to that point, he engaged in an escalatory struggle with a new U.S. administration. The back and forth of tests and sanctions would last until late fall of 2017 before Kim would announce that the country had developed its nuclear deterrent. Was Kim’s decision to cease testing tied solely to milestones reached in the nuclear and missile programs? There is little doubt that other factors also influenced the timing of his decision-making. The question going forward is whether these other factors will ultimately change Kim’s calculus to the point that he can agree to major strides on denuclearization.

## President Trump Takes a Different Approach

The election of Donald Trump marked a fundamental break in American politics and the way in which the United States interacts with the international environment. Everything that was once held sacred, such as alliances and the Liberal Democratic Order, was now in question. While the upheaval caused by the new president’s so-called transactional policies and apparent disdain for the accepted precepts of foreign policy created chaos and uncertainty within the world order, it also created momentum to address the long-standing problem of North Korea.

North Korea reacted to the election of President Trump with caution and confusion. According to several off the record comments by North Korean diplomats, Kim Jong-un and his advisors expected Hillary Clinton to be elected president. They had a game plan in place for her election, which most likely included a ramping up of the brinkmanship campaign which had begun in 2016. Donald Trump was considered to be a wildcard; the new president’s red lines and stance on North Korean provocations were the object of speculation inside Pyongyang policymaking circles. After all, President Trump had stated during the campaign that he would be willing to meet with Kim Jong-un, despite talking tough about the North Korean regime. As a result, North Korea was befuddled, which likely explains the slow response the regime had to

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<sup>62</sup> Kim Jong-un referenced Kim Il-sung and the founding *juche* idea with greater frequency than at any time since announcing his trademark *Byungjin* line in 2013. He repeatedly cited his predecessors’ “behests” as justification for this policy, but watered down the references by attributing them to past “leaders” rather than by name to Kim Il-sung or Kim Jong-il. Frequently, Kim alluded to his “principle” of “self-development”, in an apparent signal that he is developing his own leadership ideology akin to, but separate from, his grandfather’s ideology of “self-reliance”.

<sup>63</sup> KCBS, 18 March 2013.

the election of a new administration. It was not until the end of February that North Korea decided to test a new missile and toe the red lines of the new administration.

The year 2017 was one of the most unprecedented “getting to know you” periods for a new U.S. administration and a chosen adversary. Both sides began to explore each others’ bottom lines. North Korea’s actions were calculated and in keeping with standard operating procedures for the regime. Missile tests were slowly graduated in range, eventually testing Hwasong-14 ICBMs in July. The regime was much more cautious with nuclear tests. While the regime threatened nuclear tests, and even above ground tests, it was not until September that Kim decided to conduct another underground test. The Trump administration responded with sanctions but continued increasing escalatory rhetoric. In August, President Trump took umbrage at what he perceived to be threat by Kim Jong-un, warning that “North Korea best not make any more threats to the United States [or]...They will be met with fire and fury like the world has never seen.”<sup>64</sup> One month later, the rhetoric reached a crescendo when President Trump spoke before the United Nations.<sup>65</sup> In a speech that was reminiscent of President Bush’s “Axis of Evil” in its darkness, Trump warned that “The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea...Rocket Man is on a suicide mission for himself.”<sup>66</sup> Two days later, Kim Jong-un responded in a speech under the title of Chairman of the State Affairs Commission, calling President Trump a “dotard” verging on senility. He characterized Trump’s speech as a declaration of war and promised that North Korea “...will consider with seriousness exercising of a corresponding, highest level of hardline countermeasure in history.”<sup>67</sup> Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho, followed suit with a threat of a possible hydrogen bomb test over the Pacific.<sup>68</sup>

Tension continued to mount on the peninsula. South Korean experts warned that more provocations could come in October as part of the 72nd founding anniversary of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea on October 10. Seoul's presidential office also pointed to October 18, the opening day of the 19th national congress by China's Communist Party, as a possible date of North Korean action.<sup>69</sup> Following a statement by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that the United States was engaged in back channel talks with North Korea, President Trump told his top diplomat to stop "wasting his time" trying to negotiate with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un over Pyongyang's nuclear program.<sup>70</sup> The North Korean ambassador to the UN, Ja Song-nam, accused the United States of “clinging to unprecedented nuclear threats and blackmail, economic sanctions

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<sup>64</sup> “Trump Warns North Korea of ‘fire and fury,’” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 August 2017.

<sup>65</sup> This speech came in the aftermath of North Korea’s sixth nuclear weapons test and second launch of a ballistic missile over Japan into the Pacific, as well as the resumption of U.S. overflights of the Korean Peninsula by heavy bombers, which carried out practice runs with real bombs near the demilitarized zone.

<sup>66</sup> “In U.N. speech, Trump threatens to 'totally destroy North Korea' and calls Kim Jong Un 'Rocket Man,’” *Washington Post*, 19 September 2017.

<sup>67</sup> “Full Text of Kim Jong Un's Statement as Published by KCNAWatch,” VOA Online, 22 September 2017.

<sup>68</sup> “North Korea Threatens To Fire H Bomb Into Pacific Ocean,” *JoongAng Daily Online*, 21 September 2017.

<sup>69</sup> “South Korean Government, Experts Say Pyongyang Likely To Make Provocations in October,” *Yonhap*, 1 October 2017.

<sup>70</sup> “Don't 'Waste Time' Trying To Talk With N. Korea, Trump Tells Tillerson,” *Kyodo World Service*, 2 October 2017.

and blockade to deny our rights to existence and development...”<sup>71</sup> It was at this point that the narratives on both sides crystalized. From the U.S. point of view, North Korea was locked into securing its nuclear capability and only pressure and threats of force could possibly change that calculus. North Korea saw the regime’s existence under threat and the noose being tightened. At a Central Committee meeting to mark the founding of the Party, Kim Jong-un pledged to continue his policy of *Byungjin*, noting that North Korea's nuclear arms are “a precious fruition borne by its people's bloody struggle for defending the destiny and sovereignty of the country from the protracted nuclear threats of the U.S. imperialists.”<sup>72</sup>

Trying to explain the Trump Administration’s North Korea policy and strategy in this period is very difficult. It appeared to shift from side to side and speak with many voices. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson seemed to take a diplomatic approach that was not out of line with previous administrations. He stressed the administration’s desire not to engage in regime change and the need for diplomacy. Secretary of Defense James Mattis focused on alliance management and deterrence in the face of North Korean threats. The National Security Council took a harder line, focusing on the need for sanctions and threatening military consequences if Pyongyang did not bend to the Maximum Pressure strategy that was the hallmark of the Trump Administration’s policy toward North Korea. President Trump seemed to be engaged in a transactional foreign policy that shifted based on both internal and external forces. At one moment he would praise Kim Jong-un and the next lob threats at him. North Korea responded by sending out emissaries, asking former U.S. officials and Korea watchers in and around Washington about how to read the administration’s mixed signals.<sup>73</sup>

While the western media fixated on the rising tensions and inflammatory rhetoric on both sides, it missed the fact that for Kim Jong-un all the pieces were falling into place for a shift in strategy and a return to diplomacy. In May, Moon Jae-in was elected president of the Republic of Korea. For the first time in a decade, a conservative president did not occupy the Blue House. As noted, in January, a very different president, who openly talked about sitting down with Kim Jong-un, took up residence in the White House. Although tensions were rising on the peninsula, the dynamics between Seoul and Washington likely appeared optimal to Pyongyang if an off ramp could be found. Since the Kim Jong-il period, escalating tensions to deescalate and set the stage for negotiations was a standard practice. In November, Kim Jong-un found the off ramp by conducting his most audacious missile test to date, launching a Hwasong-15 ICBM on the highest trajectory yet.<sup>74</sup> The next day, Kim Jong-un announced that North Korea had mastered nuclear-strike capability and become a full-fledged “nuclear state”.<sup>75</sup> The claim, which was looked on skeptically by the international community, allowed North Korea to declare victory and engage in

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<sup>71</sup> “DPRK Accuses US Of Imposing An 'Economic Blockade',” *China Daily Asia-Pacific Online*, 4 October 2017.

<sup>72</sup> KCNA, 8 October 2017.

<sup>73</sup> “North Korea reaching out to former US officials to explain Trump’s behaviors,” *TheGrio*, 30 September 2017.

<sup>74</sup> According to some experts, the missile performed better than the two fired in July, and exhibited a potential range of more than 8,000 miles, able to reach Washington or any other part of the continental United States. See “North Korea Fires a Ballistic Missile, in a Further Challenge to Trump,” *New York Times*, 28 November 2017.

<sup>75</sup> “N.K. Declares Completion of Nukes with New ICBM Test,” *Yonhap Online*, 29 November 2017.



diplomacy on its own terms, from a self-perceived position of strength, or at a minimum as equal partners with the United States.<sup>76</sup>

## A Period of Summitry

The pivot in North Korean strategy came at the beginning of 2018 with Kim Jong-un's New Year's Day speech, the traditional venue for the Leader to lay out policy pronouncements. Kim had escalated tensions and now he was looking for an off ramp. This was not too difficult, since the Moon administration in Seoul had been trying to engage Pyongyang for months, requesting North Korea's participation in the upcoming winter Olympics. Kim had made overtures regarding North-South rapprochement in 2014, 2015, and 2017 and been rebuffed. Since the progressive Moon administration had come to power, North Korea had been careful not to criticize the president, indicating that Kim's pivot had been months in the making. He accepted the offer for North Korea to participate in the Olympics, taking the opportunity to use the pomp and circumstance of the sporting event to portray his country in a new light as a member of the international community and active participant in a process to bring peace to the peninsula.

Kim's speech also reflected an understanding of the challenge President Moon would face to improving relations with the North. For that reason, he dialed back the rhetoric on the United States. He did not accuse the United States of posing an existential threat to North Korea and dispensed with the inflammatory and threatening rhetoric that had characterized the back and forth between Kim and Trump during the summer. As for the nuclear program, he hinted that testing had come to an end,<sup>77</sup> although he showed no sign of backing down on his plans to "mass produce" and "deploy" warheads and missiles.<sup>78</sup> His comments on nuclear doctrine exceeded previous explanations. He seemed to lower the bar for potential use by focusing on infringement of "interests" and not just territorial sovereignty as a trigger.<sup>79</sup> However, Kim's language overall made clear that his basic calculus had not changed, regime survival took precedence over offensive military action.

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<sup>76</sup> In the western press and amongst policymakers, the administration's Maximum Pressure/Coercive Diplomatic strategy brought North Korea to the negotiating table. A recent report by South Korea's central bank found that North Korea's economy shrank by about 3.5 percent in 2017, a drop that economists have attributed almost entirely to sanctions. [This figure is disputed by Pyongyang. Ri Ki-song, a senior researcher with the Economic Institute of the North's Academy of Social Sciences, argues that despite sanctions, North Korea's economy has maintained steady growth with its GDP increasing from \$25 billion in 2013 to \$29.6 billion in 2016 and \$30.7 billion in 2017.] In the months since the Kim-Trump summit, North Korea still struggles to find markets for its coal and iron ore, two critical sources of revenue. Increased sanctions-busting efforts have helped only marginally, as the bulk of North Korea's marketable coal remains on the docks. That said, this narrative fails to explain the timing of Kim's decision to end his brinkmanship campaign. While there is evidence that the pressure campaign was constraining North Korea's finances and access to resources, the evidence falls short of showing that it was becoming existential to the regime. In other words, Pyongyang could have suffered through months more of pressure that did not even approach the suffering the country endured in the 1990s. Kim's timing with regard to the shift in strategy is largely explained by the alignment of three critical factors listed above: 1) a progressive administration came to power in Seoul, 2) a more flexible administration came to power in Washington, and 3) the nuclear program achieved a level of development that permitted a pause in public testing.

<sup>77</sup> Kim made clear that he considered the "might and reliability" of North Korea's nuclear deterrent "already firmly guaranteed." See *Rodong Sinmun*, 1 January 2018.

<sup>78</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, 1 January 2018.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

The diplomatic charm campaign began with North Korea's participation at the XXIII Olympic Winter Games held in Pyeongchang, South Korea. For the opening ceremonies, Kim sent his sister Kim Yo-jong and president of the Supreme People's Assembly, Kim Yong-nam, who met with President Moon and other dignitaries. U.S. Vice President Mike Pence, however, avoided meeting the North Korean delegation. The same was true of the closing ceremonies, which was attended by Ivanka Trump and Kim Yong-chol, the director of the KWP United Front Department and close advisor of Kim Jong-un. Despite the tension in U.S.-North Korean relations, President Moon took the opportunity to discuss a way forward in the inter-Korean relationship. Kim Yo-jong, carried a letter from her brother offering a summit between the two leaders in the near future.<sup>80</sup>

This was followed up by the Third Plenary Session of the Seventh Workers Party of Korea Central Committee in April; convened just 11 days after an authoritative Party Political Bureau (PB) meeting. Kim delivered a report reaffirming the Party's "simultaneous line" policy of developing the country's economy and nuclear program; however, he readjusted the priorities which fit well with the pivot to diplomacy. In particular, he stressed three points:

- North Korea "no longer need[s]" to conduct any nuclear or IRBM/ICBM tests because the "entire process of nuclear development"—which includes the "weaponization of nuclear weapons" and the "development of the delivery and strike means"—has achieved "completion".
- The "northern nuclear test site" [P'unggye] had "finished its mission" and the plenary session had "unanimously adopted" a decision to "dismantle" the site to "transparently guarantee the suspension of nuclear tests".
- North Korea had achieved the position of a "world-class" political and military state and it was time for the "entire party and country" to "concentrate all their energy" on the economy.<sup>81</sup>

In the summits that followed between North Korea, South Korea and the United States, Kim Jong-un reiterated his desire to shift focus from the nuclear program to economic development. In discussions with South Korean interlocutors, who stressed the need to align this vision with that of the United States, Kim shifted his rhetoric from having developed a nuclear program to embracing "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula".<sup>82</sup>

- On April 27, Kim Jong-un and Moon Jae-in held the first inter-Korean summit in eleven years. The resulting Panmunjom Declaration distinctly indicated the will of both Koreas to improve overall inter-Korean relations. Both sides agreed to a reduction of military tension and confidence-building in establishing a permanent peace regime. The Declaration also laid out in detail the implementation strategy that adopted a two-track approach of simultaneously advancing inter-Korean relations and resolving North Korean nuclear issues. It also affirmed that inter-Korean relations should play a leading role in the process of denuclearization negotiations. The Declaration specified a mutual

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<sup>80</sup> "Kim Jong-un's sister invites South Korean president to Pyongyang," *The Guardian*, 10 February 2018.

<sup>81</sup> *Rodong Sinmun*, 21 April 2018.

<sup>82</sup> During his first summit with China's leader Xi Jinping on March 26, Kim Jong-un reportedly said that denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula could be achieved if South Korea and the United States respond to North Korean efforts "with good intention and stable atmosphere...through a series of progressive and synchronous measures."

goal to create a permanent peace regime on the Korean Peninsula by reaffirming the need for complete denuclearization and expressing a will to declare an end to the Korean War and seek a peace treaty.<sup>83</sup> However, the Declaration only laid out a principle of denuclearization, leaving the details of the sequencing and schedule for implementation for future discussions with the United States.

- Following a surprising agreement to an offer by Kim Jong-un to hold a summit, President Trump called off the summit in May because of North Korea's apparently unwillingness to engage in good faith.<sup>84</sup> This set off a flurry of activity on the peninsula, including an unusually conciliatory statement from North Korean First Vice Foreign Affairs Minister Kim Kye-gwan, saying the regime was willing to talk with the United States "anytime" and in any format, and a follow-up summit between President Moon and Kim Jong-un on May 26. The two leaders reiterated their intent to implement the April 27 Panmunjom Declaration and to have a successful North Korea-U.S. summit. President Trump soon thereafter withdrew his objections to a summit with Kim Jong-un. This back and forth reiterated the high stakes on both sides, but also made clear that the United States and North Korea were not engaged in traditional diplomacy, but "Great Leader Diplomacy," whereby the agenda was not set out by months of diplomatic wrangling at the lower echelons of power, but set by the leaders themselves.<sup>85</sup> Instead of working out the details of an agreement in advance, the summit would serve as a venue for the leaders to develop a relationship and set the parameters for follow-up discussions designed to bring about an agreement.<sup>86</sup>
- On June 12 in Singapore, President Trump and Chairman Kim Jong-un held the first U.S.-North Korean summit. At their first handshake, Kim hinted at the Great Leader diplomacy when he told President Trump, "It was not easy to get here. For us, the past has been holding us back and old practices and prejudices have been covering our eyes and ears, but we have been able to overcome everything to arrive here today." At the end of about four hours of meetings, the two leaders signed

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<sup>83</sup> The April 2018 Declaration marked the first time that a summit-generated declaration explicitly mentioned denuclearization, although inter-Korean dialogues of the past had produced various sorts of agreements that included denuclearization or the resolution of nuclear issues. The 2007 Declaration only stipulated that there should be an effort to implement a Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks and the February 13 Agreement for "the resolution of nuclear issues on the Korean Peninsula." Over the course of 21 inter-Korean ministerial talks since the 2000 inter-Korean summit, the agreements had specified North Korean nuclear issues several times. However, those agreements used only tone-downed expressions such as "exchange of opinions on nuclear issues between the two sides" or "peaceful resolution of nuclear issues" (2002-2004). It was only after 2005 that the wording of the agreements had advanced to "a final goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."

<sup>84</sup> President Trump's decision to cancel the summit followed a few days of harsh statements by both U.S. and North Korean officials. National Security advisor John Bolton had referenced a Libya denuclearization model for North Korea to follow, one in which no sanctions relief would be forthcoming until complete denuclearization was achieved. Choe Son-hui, a North Korean vice foreign minister, countered that whether the summit between Kim Jong-un and President Donald Trump would happen as scheduled entirely rested on the decision and behavior of the United States. She noted that "Whether the U.S. will meet us at a meeting room or encounter us at nuclear-to-nuclear showdown is entirely dependent upon the decision and behavior of the United States." See "N. Korea Threatens To Walk Away From Planned Summit With U.S.," *Yonhap*, 24 May 2018.

<sup>85</sup> When the preparations for the summit got derailed by subordinates on both sides, it was Kim and Trump who apparently put the meeting back on course, with the help of South Korean President Moon. See "North Reacts Cordially To Trump's Cancelling Of Summit," *JoongAng Daily Online*, 25 May 2018.

<sup>86</sup> The flurry of summits from March through June demonstrated Kim Jong-un's unique leadership style, which appears to be goal-oriented and values results over protocol. Kim had used the foreign affairs apparatus to run the charm campaign of 2013-2015 and it failed to secure the economic relief he was looking for. This may have influenced his desire to take a more personal role in driving the diplomatic agenda in 2018. He has also followed up summits with one country with summits with another. After the first inter-Korean summit in April, he met a second time with Xi Jinping at Dalian. The second summit in Panmunjom was used to get the summit with the United States back on track. After the Singapore summit with President Trump, he had a third summit in Beijing to provide a readout.

a document on broad principles of agreement. In addition to committing to establish peace on the peninsula, improving relations between the two countries, and returning the bodies of soldiers lost in the Korean War, North Korea committed to work toward complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. In the discussions and at the follow-up press conference, President Trump alluded to Kim's agreement to dismantle the missile test facility at Dongchang-ri. Trump also stated, to the surprise of many, that he had decided to halt upcoming U.S.-ROK joint "wargames."

- Following nearly three months in which U.S.-North Korean follow up to the summit stalled, highlighted by a failed visit by Secretary of State Pompeo to Pyongyang and another cancelled visit, a third inter-Korean summit took place in Pyongyang from September 18-20. In the lead up to the summit, both the United States and North Korea had settled back into their familiar talking points with the Trump administration stressing North Korea's lack of progress on denuclearization and North Korean officials calling for a phased approach to a peace regime. South Korean officials saw the upcoming summit as a chance for President Moon to act as mediator and get the U.S.-North Korean talks back on track. At the summit, Kim Jong-un complained of a lack of reciprocity on the part of the United States. North Korea had decommissioned its nuclear test facility at Punggye-ri and taken other steps that he felt were not appreciated by Washington. But in the end, Kim agreed to finish decommissioning the missile test facility at Dongchang-ri and depending on U.S. reciprocal actions was willing to decommission the nuclear facility at Yongbyon.

The summits and accompanying narratives coming out of Pyongyang, Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing point to a fundamental misalignment on the issue of denuclearization and the way forward in terms of security on the Korean Peninsula. For the United States, the first and only issue centers on the unilateral denuclearization of North Korea. All other issues and points of contention are secondary to this issue and will not be dealt with in full until North Korea has completely and verifiably dismantled its nuclear program. Japan is closely tied to this view, although it also stresses the need to make progress on the abduction issue, which is an emotional and politically charged issue for the Japanese citizenry. South Korea shares the U.S. concern on the North Korean nuclear program, but the progressive Moon administration is also concerned about improving inter-Korean ties and, therefore, sees denuclearization as integrated in a larger peace initiative on the peninsula. China and its erstwhile ally Russia view denuclearization as a pathway to a larger regional order where U.S. equities and its role on the Korean Peninsula are weakened. For Beijing, the critical objective is to create the conditions on the peninsula by which the ROK-U.S. alliance is dissolved and U.S. presence is no longer needed.<sup>87</sup> North Korea, while sharing some of China and South Korea's equities, embraces denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula,<sup>88</sup> but strongly hints that this does not mean unilateral North Korean denuclearization. It also likely does not share China's strong desire for the

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<sup>87</sup> China is well aware that Korea is the anchor for the U.S. position in Northeast Asia. If a wedge is created between Washington and Seoul, the overall U.S. position in Asia could begin to unravel. At the same time, China's influence with regard to North Korea is conditional. The current stalemate in U.S.-North Korean relations increases Pyongyang's reliance on Beijing for protection and economic security in the face of ongoing sanctions and threats from Washington. However, if North Korea and the United States were to manage to improve their relations without China's involvement, then the Sino-North Korean relationship could begin to strain as Pyongyang could look to Washington as a counterweight to China. China does have geography on its side, so the viability of the latter scenario is debatable. For an interesting analysis of North Korea's relationship with China, see Weiqi Zhang and Dmitry Zinoviev, "How North Korea Views China: Quantitative Analysis of Korean Central News Agency Reports," *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (September 2018).

<sup>88</sup> For an overview of how North Korea has embraced the phrase "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" over its history, see the Appendix.

U.S. withdrawal from the peninsula, since this would eliminate the counterweight it has in its relations with Beijing.<sup>89</sup>

This lack of alignment, especially among the United States and its allies, dampens any optimism that progress on denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula can be achieved any time soon, and without resolution of this issue, real peace on the peninsula will remain an illusion. At the time of this writing, the Trump administration adheres to its policy of Maximum Pressure in the fading hope that it will hold the international community firm in its commitment to force Pyongyang to part with its nuclear program.<sup>90</sup> Secretary of State Pompeo has once again traveled to Pyongyang and hinted that progress is being made, although not on any set timeline. While Kim Jong-un is speaking in calming tones about wanting to dismantle the program as part of a reciprocal process that will involve U.S. incentives, little has been done to address the regime's rationale for the program. In other words, the United States and international community remain committed to forcing North Korea to take steps that run contrary to its currently perceived national interest—regime survival and perpetuation of Kim family rule. As a consequence, North Korea, regardless of its rhetoric, will remain a threat to the region. The misalignment of equities in the region will act to ensure that the status quo remains in effect.

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<sup>89</sup> In both the lead up to the Singapore Summit and following the third inter-Korean summit, Pyongyang stressed that a future peace regime does not mean that U.S. troops will have to leave the peninsula. Seoul has also reiterated this point on several occasions. See “North Korea Drops Troop Demand, but U.S. Reacts Warily,” *New York Times*, 18 April 2018.

<sup>90</sup> Despite the frequent calls for Maximum Pressure and the need to more hermetically seal North Korea off from sources of international finance and assistance, recent analysis of effective non-proliferation strategies shows that cooperative strategies, such as foreign aid, diplomatic recognition, and nuclear agreements have a more compelling impact on stopping or rolling back nuclear programs than coercive strategies such as threats of the use of force and economic or diplomatic sanctions. Although counterintuitive, cooperative strategies have a more direct impact on a country's strategic calculus, while coercive strategies do little more than validate the need for a nuclear program. The best strategy is one that uses a mix of pressure and incentives to create a clear path to an endgame. See Ariel F.W. Petrovics, “Nuclear (De)Proliferation: Intended vs. Inadvertent Policy Outcomes,” Brief presented at CNA on September 25, 2018.

# What Is to be Done?

At the time of this writing, Moon Jae-in and Kim Jong-un have completed their third summit and President Trump has spoken in front on the UN General Assembly in which he praised North Korea for its efforts since the Singapore summit and hinted at a second summit with the North Korean leader. Critics of U.S. North Korea policy warn of half-steps and potential traps. They rightly point out that there is no common definition nor road map or timeline for “denuclearization”. While reaching an agreement on what denuclearization means may be hampered for some time given legitimacy issues inside North Korea,<sup>91</sup> a roadmap and initial timeline are likely within reach. It essentially comes down to context and how denuclearization is nested in the United States’ wider national security and Asia policy.

The fundamental problem with the U.S. North Korea policy is its framework. It is not suitable for the situation the United States finds itself in with this particular adversary. Geography and seventy years of history have created a situation where the United States cannot dictate its will that North Korea denuclearize. Washington does not possess such leverage and its past actions toward regimes such as Iraq and Libya have crystalized in the minds of North Korean leaders that only a nuclear deterrent will forestall eventual regime change. This has created the intractable position both countries find themselves in today: a zero-sum game where there must be an absolute winner and an absolute loser. Because this relationship is an asymmetric one, North Korea as the weaker power is not willing to make the first move. The United States feels it has right on its side in the concept of nuclear non-proliferation and is not willing to “reward bad behavior” by giving in first on economic and security guarantees that Pyongyang covets. In the background, China continues to rise and spread its influence throughout Asia. It values stability on its border and likely views denuclearization as a wedge issue to keep the United States off balance. Since the Singapore summit, Beijing’s support for sanctions and the U.S. Maximum Pressure strategy have begun to wane.

In order to address this challenge, U.S. policymakers need to make two major shifts in their strategy. First, drop denuclearization as the single-solitary objective of U.S. strategy toward North Korea. As currently constituted, denuclearization is the entry point into negotiations instead of where it should be, the ultimate goal at the end of a process. In addition, the United States uses denuclearization as the measuring stick by which to evaluate its relationship with North Korea.<sup>92</sup> This leaves Pyongyang in an untenable position of “losing face” whenever it makes a concession on its program. As a result, it is unwilling to take any verifiable and irreversible steps, which would cause severe harm to its ability to reconstitute the program if

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<sup>91</sup> North Korean media has been cautious in its treatment of nuclear issues since Kim Jong-un committed to “complete denuclearization” of the Korean peninsula in the 27 April Panmunjom Declaration. It has avoided publicly supporting “complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization” (CVID) and has consistently messaged that “complete denuclearization” of the peninsula does not mean North Korea’s unilateral disarmament.

<sup>92</sup> A cursory reading of western articles and analysis on North Korea makes clear that progress toward denuclearization is the only way we keep score on whether U.S. policy and strategy is working. This discussion often ignores wider issues of stability in the region, which should also be taken into account when determining the effectiveness of a strategy. See for example Chris R. Hill, “Trump’s Floundering North Korea Strategy,” Project Syndicate, 25 October 2018.

diplomacy fails.<sup>93</sup> To address these shortcomings, the United States should adopt a phased and reciprocal strategy centered on a peace regime. Steps toward denuclearization can be wrapped into this strategy as confidence-building measures by North Korea. In this way, Kim Jong-un can make substantive steps without losing face or giving up something for nothing.<sup>94</sup> Security guarantees and economic incentives (including an end of Korean War declaration and sanctions relief) can come from the United States and international community,<sup>95</sup> which would keep North Korea invested in the process over the long term.<sup>96</sup> In addition, as North Korea invests itself in a peace regime, Kim Jong-un can garner legitimacy for something other than developing his country's nuclear program. He can portray himself to his people as the leader who brought peace and economic prosperity to a country that has never known either, thus weakening the rationale for retaining the nuclear program.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> The Trump administration's decision to pull out of the JCPOA with Iran has raised doubts in North Korea whether any deal it makes with one U.S. administration will be honored by future administrations.

<sup>94</sup> There are some, such as Chun Yung-woo, a former national-security adviser to the conservative South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, who believe that Kim Jong-un may be willing to part with a significant portion, if not all, of his nuclear program now that North Korea has announced its "completion" and developed the know-how to quickly reconstitute the capability if needed. Giving up nuclear weapons for economic development and an end to international isolation might be worth it. A lingering concern among many conservatives, however, is that Kim might not feel he has to make major concessions on the nuclear program if the Moon administration is overly ambitious and attaches higher value to improvement in inter-Korean relations than in denuclearization. A phased approach to denuclearization in service of a larger peace regime could ensure that North and South Korean concerns are met in an orderly process set to a manageable timeline. In other words, there would no longer be the need to rush in order to meet some political deadline or ensure that equities inside the alliance are satisfied. See "Moon's Praise-and-Pressure Plan to Get Trump to Help End Korean War," *Defenseone*, 26, September 2018.

<sup>95</sup> In a speech before the United Nations, Ri Yong-ho, North Korea's foreign minister, rejected any move towards denuclearization unless it came with tangible U.S. concessions. In the 15 minute, 1100 word speech, Ri made 12 references to "trust" and seven references to the "economy," the same number of references to "denuclearization." The message was clear. A declaration ending the Korean War was not sufficient. Sanctions relief and economic aid would have to be part of the package for North Korea to move forward. This point of view has become increasingly apparent in discussions between the United States and North Korea since Secretary of State Pompeo's fourth visit to North Korea on October 7. North Korea's intense desire for easing sanctions are likely to be one of the major items on the negotiating table along with the end-of-war declaration in the run-up to the meeting between North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Choe Son-hui and U.S. State Department Special Representative for North Korean Policy Stephen Biegun, which will function as "working-level talks" prior to the second North Korea-US summit. See "North Korea's Demands Shifting From End Of War Declaration To Easing Of UN Sanctions," *Hankyoreh Online*, 17 October 2018.

<sup>96</sup> Many within the Pyongyang-watching community will take issue with this recommendation. They see Kim Jong-un not only as the third generation leader of North Korea, but as the lineal descendant of his father and grandfather's policy preferences. Kim Il-sung was driven to reunify the peninsula, while Kim Jong-il was looking to keep the regime alive. But a contrary opinion notes that Kim Jong-un has signaled he may be cut from a different cloth, that his strategy and tactics belong to another archetype, the strongman and economic reformer. If he sees his legacy tied to economic development vice nuclear deterrence, he may be willing to make deals that his predecessors may never have dreamed of. But he will only do so under certain conditions. This was made clear in a recent *Rodong Simmun* article, which stressed that an end of war declaration is a key "starting point" for moving ahead on denuclearization and needs to be linked to the North's economic development. "With the danger of war constantly looming, it is not possible for us to unilaterally abandon the nuclear weapons that guarantee our sovereignty, right to exist, and right to develop." See John Delury, "Kim Jong-un Has a Dream. The U.S. Should Help Him Realize It," *The New York Times*, 21 September 21, 2018 and Robert Carlin, "More DPRK Signals on Denuclearization," *38 North*, 17 September 2018.

<sup>97</sup> As currently constructed, U.S. North Korea policy is trying to remove the nuclear program from the rationale for having it in the first place: a deterrent to regime change from the United States and a legitimacy bulwark for the Kim family. If denuclearization is ever going to occur, it is necessary first to remove the rationale for the program and give the North Korean leadership something to put in its place (e.g., peace and prosperity).

Second, integrate denuclearization of North Korea into the larger U.S. strategy in Asia focused on managing the rise of China. By keeping denuclearization of North Korea as an independent goal unto itself, the United States has undermined its ability to manage relations with allies and given adversaries ways for countering U.S. influence in the region. South Korea's leadership transition to a progressive administration has had an impact on bilateral relations with the United States, especially as it comes to policy and strategy toward North Korea. It has created the potential for a wedge with the administration in Seoul eager to improve inter-Korean relations while the administration in Washington remains cautious and insistent on maintaining a hardline. China and North Korea have already preyed on this wedge to slow decision-making on THAAD and get Washington to embrace Beijing's freeze for freeze agreement as a temporary measure for dealing with the denuclearization issue. Instead of making North Korea the target, denuclearization should be folded into the larger U.S. China strategy. This would include an embrace of the inter-Korean peace regime with the proviso that U.S. troops will remain on the peninsula after a peace treaty is signed as a force for stability and a guarantor of South Korean and regional security until full and verifiable denuclearization of the peninsula has been achieved. This not only would undermine Beijing's strategy of weakening the U.S. position in Northeast Asia, but could drive a wedge between China and North Korea, which likely share different equities when it comes to U.S. presence on the peninsula.



# Appendix: Denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula

The North Korean embrace of the notion of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula is as old as its desire to possess nuclear weapons.<sup>98</sup> “Denuclearization” first found purchase in the North Korean lexicon in 1954 and was tied to the concept of the Zone of Peace (ZOP). At the Asian Socialist Conference in November, North Korea advocated that ZOPs should be established throughout the Asian region to address the threat of U.S. nuclear weapons. This was a period of high tension in the region following the Taiwan Strait Crisis and just a year past the end of the conflict on the Korean Peninsula. In both of these clashes between the United States and communist regimes, the former had either contemplated or threatened the use of nuclear weapons. By the late 1950s, the United States had introduced nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula. In 1958, Pyongyang (and Beijing) joined the Soviet Union’s call for a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone in Asia along the lines of a similar Moscow proposal for Central Europe in 1956. At the 4th Party Congress in 1961, Kim Il-sung stated “we support the People’s Republic of China’s proposal to change the region into a region without nuclear weapons.”<sup>99</sup>

In the mid-1970s, North Korea began to attach the idea of denuclearization to the potential solution of the “Korea Problem.” On August 15, *Rodong Sinmun* first referred to denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula as a solution to the twenty-year standoff. Although this reference was tied to the inter-Korean dialogue with the Park Chung-hee administration and the risk of another war on the peninsula, North Korea’s apparent embrace of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula was driven in larger measure by its entry into the Non-Aligned Movement, which it had joined in 1975. In the mid-1970s, Asian members of the NAM proposed several nuclear weapons free zones across Asia, all of which North Korea publicly supported. It was not a coincidence that this stance dovetailed with North Korea’s proclaimed perception of increased threat from U.S. nuclear attack following Secretary of Defense Schlesinger’s security commitment to South Korea, including a nuclear umbrella as a means to encourage Seoul to forgo its own nuclear weapons program. The Team Spirit exercise of June 1976 highlighted the U.S. nuclear umbrella, something that North Korea pointed to as evidence of the threat and the need for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

In the 1980s, North Korea’s denuclearization strategy began to evolve. Since the 1950s, references to the threat of nuclear weapons and the need for their withdrawal or prohibition were tied to North Korean condemnation of the U.S. posture in the region. The United States had nuclear weapons and North Korea did not. The logic was clear. However, in the 1980s, North Korea’s nascent nuclear program began to grow and, as a consequence, its rhetoric regarding denuclearization evolved. Pyongyang’s denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula argument transformed into a strategy to secure U.S. concessions regarding its own nuclear posture on the peninsula in return for North Korean denuclearization. In other words, from North Korea’s point of view, the nuclear programs on both sides were now points of leverage in a process of negotiation. Such negotiations would eliminate the nuclear threat and be secured through mutual inspection.

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<sup>98</sup> For a detailed examination of North Korea’s policy on denuclearization, see Choongkoo Lee, “The Birth and Revival of North Korea’s Denuclearization Policy for the Korean Peninsula,” *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (September 2018).

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

This would be a major step forward in ensuring that nuclear proliferation did not take hold in the region, an argument found in articles in *Rodong Sinmun* warning against Japan's potential nuclear program.

Following the nuclear crisis of 1994 and lasting for a decade, North Korea's rhetoric regarding denuclearization disappeared. There were two major reasons. First and foremost was the Agreed Framework. Based on an agreement forged by Kim Il-sung and former President Jimmy Carter, the framework called for a freeze of North Korea's nuclear program and return to the Non-Proliferation Treaty in exchange for receiving light-water reactors from the international community. The nuclear crisis was averted and the American threat was reduced. In addition, dynamics inside the regime were changing. With Kim Il-sung's death and Kim Jong-il's ascension to power, the military's influence within the regime began to grow. The Military First Policy pushed back against the anti-nuclear argument. In 1995, the North Korean media began a campaign of criticism of the Gorbachev "revisionist" policies, including his efforts to reduce nuclear weapons.<sup>100</sup> Nuclear weapons were now tied to North Korea's deterrent against a potential second nuclear crisis, not to mention they served as a point of legitimacy for the new leader.

As Kim Jong-il's power consolidated and solidified, combined with economic incentives from China and South Korea and an increasingly amenable Bush administration, North Korea once again in 2005 resurrected its calls for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. Kim noted that denuclearization was a legacy from his father and agreed to join the Six Party Talks in July and August, which eventually reaffirmed the principles of the "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula." Following the U.S. transfer of the funds sequestered as part of the Banco Delta Asia investigation in 2007, North Korea destroyed its cooling tower at the Yongbyon Nuclear facility in June 2008. However, soon thereafter, the North Korean media began to question the sincerity of certain hardline factions inside the United States, which it claimed were against denuclearization. Although it began to distance itself from the Six Party agreements, it continued to support the idea of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula. As time passed and North Korea began to test nuclear weapons and missiles, denuclearization in North Korean rhetoric became hostage to joint U.S.-ROK military exercises and UN sanctions. However, denuclearization as the ultimate goal remained, as was clearly pointed out in Kim Jong-il's New Year's Address in 2011. In this respect, referencing denuclearization reflected North Korea's efforts to resume negotiations, although the possibility of talks was remote, at best.

In the Kim Jong-un era, the phrase "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" has been used to draw attention to the fundamental disconnect in North Korea's relations with the United States. The phrase underlines the argument criticizing the U.S. preconditions for talks. In other words, from Pyongyang's perspective, requiring North Korea to denuclearize first is deceitful and unhelpful and does nothing more than highlight the gap that exists between the United States and North Korea in how they view the problem and the way forward. If progress is going to be made, as became clear during the inter-Korean summits and the summit in Singapore, all sides would have to part with the notion of unilateral denuclearization in favor of an ultimate goal of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

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<sup>100</sup> Ko Jung-woong and Lee Jung-hyang, *Experience of Anti-Revisionist Fight of the Workers' Party* (Pyongyang: Social Science Publications, 1995).

# About the Author

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