

# **Endgame: A Reflection on U.S. Strategic Choices and the North Korean Threat**

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## **Introduction**

We may be moving closer to a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula – a conflict that could have a nuclear dimension. As 2018 begins, the signs are ominous. Kim Jong Un’s New Year’s speech marked the opening of a North Korean campaign to gain acceptance for its status as a nuclear weapons power. Seoul’s quick and positive response to his overtures stood in sharp contrast to Washington’s strong negative reaction. The U.S. continues to demand North Korean denuclearization, and has declared a nuclear-armed North Korea “intolerable” and “unacceptable.” On its part, Pyongyang has vowed never to give up its nuclear weapons and has called for the United States to recognize the “reality” of a nuclear-armed DPRK.

The U.S. and the DPRK could be on a collision course. Washington is hinting that military action may be needed to prevent North Korea’s acquisition of the capability to threaten the United States with nuclear weapons. The DPRK may believe the U.S. is bluffing, and has promised to strengthen further its nuclear deterrent and its ability to attack the United States.

Washington’s flirtation with a “military option” is fueled by concern that North Korea will soon be able to threaten the U.S. homeland with nuclear weapons, and by the belief that the classic tools of U.S. security strategy, including deterrence, are of no use against an “irrational” North Korea.

With tensions rising and the possibility of confrontation looming, these and other assumptions need to be reexamined and tested to avoid miscalculation. As the North Korea crisis moves to a new and dangerous level, the time is ripe for a serious reassessment of the military option, its dangers, and its potential to undermine America's Northeast Asian alliances. Indeed, the moment could not be better for a serious review of all three major remaining options and their consequences, and for frank consultations with allies and partners, as well as straight talk with the American people and allies about U.S. intentions. This review must include answering the most important question of all: How does this end?

### **“How does this end?”**

In the spring of 2003, as the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division he commanded smashed its way to the gates of Baghdad, Major General David Petraeus, perhaps sensing what was to come, posed his now-famous question, “Tell me, how does this end?”<sup>1</sup>

Petraeus' instincts about the failure to anticipate the consequences of the U.S. invasion proved better than he realized. Soon enough, the answer to his question became obvious. Almost 15 years later, that war remains with us in important ways.

The chaos that erupted in the wake of the invasion intensified and metastasized, spilling well beyond the borders of Iraq. Terrorism, fanaticism, sectarian strife, and systemic collapse became the hallmarks of a region in crisis. Today, the

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Engelhardt, “Tell Me How This Ends”: David Petraeus Finally Answers his Own Question,” *Common Dreams*, October 17, 2017, see: <https://www.commondreams.org/views/2017/10/17/tell-me-how-ends-david-petraeus-finally-answers-his-own-question>

United States continues to pay a price in blood and treasure to manage the tragic consequences of its war of choice against Iraq.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the United States faces a crucial policy choice as it considers how to respond to North Korea's worrisome advances in both its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. Those programs, which already endanger American allies and U.S. bases in the Western Pacific, will soon pose a direct threat to the American homeland.

As Washington reviews its options, options that include the use of military force, it is worth recalling Petraeus' question – and the answer. If the United States chooses military action against the DPRK, the consequences will be significant in a region that is much more vital to U.S. security interests than the Middle East was in 2003. But from today's vantage point, those consequences may not be fully apparent. All the more reason for prudence, wisdom, and careful reflection as Washington makes its choice.

As some in the U.S. administration consider military action, Washington is being urged to consider another way to deal with Pyongyang's inexorable march towards a full-fledged nuclear-weapons capability. Prominent figures, including former cabinet members and noted non-proliferation experts, argue that it is time to accept the inevitability of a permanently nuclear-armed North Korea. They call for the U.S. to shift its approach and "manage" the threat posed by a hostile North Korea. They seem confident this can be done, despite Pyongyang's dangerous track record and its repeated threats to use its nuclear weapons against America and its allies. Considering the risks involved, adopting this course would have its own profound consequences, intended or otherwise. There are also risks associated with the other remaining option, i.e., relying on

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<sup>2</sup> Richard N. Haass, *War of Necessity, War of Choice: A Memoir of Two Iraq Wars*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009)

overwhelming and unprecedented pressure to convince or compel Pyongyang to change course.

As the United States contemplates its choices, the options have become clearer and starker. Meanwhile, Washington's concern over the implications of a nuclear-armed North Korea is rising.

### **Threat vs. Threat Perception**

In 2017, U.S. concerns over the threat posed by a nuclear-armed North Korea rose to an unprecedented level. President Trump came into office in January faced with the likelihood that the Pyongyang regime would soon develop the ability to directly threaten American territory. North Korea quickly signaled its intentions to the new U.S. president by firing a new type of ballistic missile towards Japan just as President Trump was dining with Japanese Prime Minister Abe.<sup>3</sup>

On September 3, 2017, North Korea carried out its sixth underground nuclear test, the DPRK's largest and most successful nuclear detonation to date. With a yield estimated by some to have been as high as 250 kilotons, the blast involved a thermonuclear device or a "boosted fission" weapon, marking a major advance in Pyongyang's development of nuclear weapons.<sup>4</sup>

Pyongyang followed the nuclear test by launching a Hwasong-12 intermediate-range ballistic missile into the North Pacific Ocean on September 15th. This was

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<sup>3</sup> Choe Sang-hun, "North Korea Fires Ballistic Missile, Challenging Trump," *The New York Times*, February 11, 2017, see:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/11/world/asia/north-korea-missile-test-trump.html>

<sup>4</sup> "U.S. Nuclear Commander Assumes North Korea Tested H-Bomb Sept. 3," CBS News, September 15, 2017, at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-s-nuclear-commander-assumes-north-korea-tested-h-bomb-sept-3/>; Jack Kim and Ju-Min Park, "Possible two-stage hydrogen bomb seen 'game-changer for North Korea,'" *Reuters*, September 3, 2017, at:

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-thermonuclear-ana/possible-two-stage-hydrogen-bomb-seen-game-changer-for-north-korea-idUSKCN1BE0PT>

the second consecutive successful test of the Hwasong-12 system over Japanese territory. The missile reportedly flew some 3,700 kilometers – over 1,000 kilometers further than the previous test in August.<sup>5</sup>

Taken together with its successful test of nuclear-capable, medium-range, solid-fuel missiles in February and May 2017, the message conveyed to the United States by all this activity was that Pyongyang had succeeded in developing a range of missiles capable of striking regional targets, including U.S. bases in the Western Pacific. The next step was to demonstrate its ability to do so against the continental United States.

North Korea did so on November 29, launching a previously untested intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), the Hwasong-15. The new missile flew on a near-vertical trajectory, reaching an altitude of some 4,475 kilometers before falling into the Sea of Japan. According to experts, had the missile been launched on a flatter trajectory, it could have reached targets anywhere in the continental United States.<sup>6</sup>

Despite its technical advances, North Korea has yet to demonstrate mastery of several key steps necessary to target the United States. The DPRK has not shown that it has manufactured a shielded warhead capable of surviving the physical forces of reentry into the Earth's atmosphere. Pyongyang has never detonated a missile-borne nuclear weapon. Despite the successful flight of the Hwasong-15, that missile has never been flown on the flatter trajectory required to reach the United States. And North Korea has not proven that the Hwasong-15 can carry a heavy nuclear payload all the way to the continental United States. In

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<sup>5</sup> Chris Graham, Danny Boyle, and Neil Connor, "North Korea fires second missile over Japan as US tells China and Russia to take 'direct action,'" *The Telegraph*, September 15, 2017, at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/09/14/north-korea-files-another-ballistic-missile-japan-residents/>

<sup>6</sup> Ankit Panda, "The Hwasong-15: The Anatomy of North Korea's New ICBM," *The Diplomat*, December 6, 2017, at: <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/the-hwasong-15-the-anatomy-of-north-koreas-new-icbm/>

the November 29 test, the missile reached an impressive height precisely because it was carrying a light payload.

Clearly, North Korea has not yet reached the finish line when it comes to demonstrating a credible ability to threaten the United States with nuclear weapons. More development and testing will have to be done, a task that will take months or longer. As a result, the United States can expect Pyongyang to actively conduct further missile and nuclear testing in 2018.

This gives the United States time to develop its response. However, the speed with which the North has managed to develop its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles remains a major concern. This explains the Trump administration's signaling that its patience is limited and Washington's declaration it will not allow Pyongyang to cross the nuclear finish line.

During 2017, the DPRK's nuclear and missile tests occurred in the context of an escalating rhetorical confrontation between the U.S. president and the North Korean leader. Emphasizing U.S. determination to halt North Korea's nuclear and missile programs, President Trump threatened to rain "fire and fury" on the DPRK and ridiculed Kim Jong Un as "rocket man." Not to be outdone, the North Korean leader used an extraordinary televised speech to call Trump a "dotard" and "deranged."<sup>7</sup> The personal confrontation between the two leaders took a troubling new turn at the beginning of 2018 when Trump responded to Kim's worrisome New Year's speech with an ominous tweet referring to America's nuclear capabilities and the U.S. "nuclear button."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Jesselyn Cook, "'Dotard' vs. 'Rocket Man': The Nuclear Standoff That Rattled 2017," *Huffington Post*, December 26, 2017, at: [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/dotard-vs-rocketman-the-nuclear-standoff-that-rattled-2017\\_us\\_5a3e8bdce4b0b0e5a7a27be6](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/dotard-vs-rocketman-the-nuclear-standoff-that-rattled-2017_us_5a3e8bdce4b0b0e5a7a27be6)

<sup>8</sup> "Trump to Kim: My nuclear button is 'bigger and more powerful'," *BBC News*, January 3, 2018, at: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42549687>

North Korea's heated rhetoric and steady progress in developing deliverable nuclear weapons has exacerbated already deep concerns in Washington and fed the growing sense of urgency about Pyongyang's threat and intentions. Early in 2017, the new U.S. president needed little help in focusing his concerns on North Korea. Prior to his inauguration, Trump responded to North Korea's promise to develop a nuclear weapon capable of hitting parts of the United States by tweeting, "It won't happen."<sup>9</sup>

The escalation of tensions since then has only intensified President Trump's sense of Pyongyang's threat. It may also have contributed to a view in the U.S. administration that inaction would be seen as weakness and therefore even risky military action should be considered. The Trump administration's perception of the threat has caused both policy and rhetoric to shift in an increasingly tougher direction. Today, there are signs that the United States might be prepared to fulfill the president's tweeted promise of January 2017 by military action, if necessary.

### **The Gathering Storm**

Washington's sense of urgency about Pyongyang's nuclear and missile advances can be seen in the upsurge in U.S. and allied military activity on and around the Korean Peninsula. New military deployments and the increased tempo and scope of military exercises have been designed both to reassure Korean and Japanese allies and caution North Korea against military threats and adventurism. But they have another, equally important function.

The deployments of nuclear-capable or dual-use systems, the increase in training missions by U.S. strike assets, including aircraft carriers and strategic bombers, and the conduct of major exercises involving new military capabilities

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<sup>9</sup> Melanie Zanona, "Trump on North Korea missile threat: It won't happen," *The Hill*, January 2, 2017, at: <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/312428-trump-on-north-korea-missile-threat-it-wont-happen>

are clearly intended to underscore the threat of possible U.S. military action against North Korea.

U.S. references to “all options” being on the table are standard fare when it comes to dealing with armed and dangerous adversaries. However, under the Trump administration, this language has taken on a more threatening tone with respect to North Korea. The rhetoric directed at North Korea has taken various forms, including President Trump’s “fire and fury” remarks and his stated preparedness to “take care of” the North Korea problem.

In late November 2017, U.S. National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster cited President Trump as saying “...he’s not going to tolerate North Korea being able to threaten the United States.”<sup>10</sup> Coming on the heels of Pyongyang’s Hwasong-15 test, the remark suggested the United States was prepared to prevent North Korea from threatening U.S. territory.

As 2017 drew to a close, reports about the possible use of military force against North Korea picked up. In early December, National Security Adviser McMaster declared that the potential for war with North Korea was “increasing every day.”<sup>11</sup> A British press report, citing U.S. sources, said the United States was preparing for a “bloody nose” attack on North Korea.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, explaining the newly published U.S. National Security Strategy document in a December interview, General McMaster reiterated U.S. determination not to allow North Korea to possess the “destructive capability” of nuclear weapons. “We cannot tolerate the

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<sup>10</sup> David E. Sanger, “Washington Eyes a Cold War Strategy Against North Korea,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2017, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/29/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-strategy-deterrence.html>

<sup>11</sup> Ryan Browne and Barbara Starr, “McMaster: Potential for war with North Korea ‘increasing every day,’” *CNN*, December 3, 2017, at: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/02/politics/mcmaster-potential-war-north-korea/index.html>

<sup>12</sup> Ben Riley-Smith, “Exclusive: US making plans for ‘bloody nose’ military attack on North Korea,” *The Telegraph*, December 20, 2017, at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/12/20/exclusive-us-making-plans-bloody-nose-military-attack-north/>



risk” of living with a nuclear North Korea,” he said, adding, “We are in a race to be able to solve this problem.”<sup>13</sup>

These and other references to U.S. readiness to act against North Korea have sparked widespread concern in the United States, including among retired senior U.S. military officers. In a television interview on November 2017, retired four-star General Barry McCaffrey, a well-connected figure in U.S. national security circles, warned that the United States was “Inescapably...sliding toward war” with North Korea, and suggested that a conflict might begin by the summer of 2018.<sup>14</sup>

Echoing and amplifying concerns he had expressed in an interview last autumn, retired former Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Mike Mullen stated on December 31<sup>st</sup> that, “We’re actually closer, in my view, to a nuclear war with North Korea and in that region than we’ve ever been.” Mullen added, “I don’t see the opportunities how to solve this diplomatically at this point.”<sup>15</sup>

In mid-December, U.S. Senator Lindsey Graham, a friend and occasional golf partner of President Trump, put the chances of a U.S. attack on North Korea at 30%, with those chances rising to 70% if Pyongyang were to test another nuclear weapon. On December 31, 2017, Graham reiterated his views about the possibility of U.S. military action against North Korea. Asked whether he thought 2018 would be the year in which preemptive strikes might be carried out against North Korea, Graham replied that 2018 will “...be the year to deny North Korea the capability to hit the homeland.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Eliza Relman, “HR McMaster says the US ‘can’t tolerate’ a nuclear-armed North Korea,” *Business Insider*, December 19, 2017, at: <http://www.businessinsider.com/hr-mcmaster-says-us-cant-tolerate-nuclear-armed-north-korea-2017-12>

<sup>14</sup> “Gen. Barry McCaffrey: US and North Korea ‘sliding towards war,’” *The 11<sup>th</sup> Hour*, MSNBC, October 9, 2017, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-a2fxb\\_G0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-a2fxb_G0)

<sup>15</sup> Jessica Kwong, “North Korea Threat: Nuclear War with U.S. Closer Than Ever, Retired Admiral Says,” *Newsweek*, December 31, 2017, at: <http://www.newsweek.com/north-korea-threat-nuclear-war-us-closer-ever-retired-admiral-says-766948>

<sup>16</sup> “Graham on North Korea, Iran: U.S> can deliver ‘fatal blows to really bad actors in 2018,’” CBS News, Face the Nation, December 31, 2017, at: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/graham-on-north-korea-iran-we-can-deliver-fatal-blows-to-really-bad-actors-in-2018/>

## **Collision Course?**

As 2018 begins, the United States and North Korea may be on a collision course. The United States has not only declared it will not co-exist with a nuclear-armed North Korea, it has also stated that it will prevent North Korea from becoming a nuclear threat. Taken at face value, this position leaves little room for concession or compromise. And if taken literally, it suggests that Washington is offering Pyongyang a starkly binary choice: agree to end your nuclear weapons program or the United States will use military force to end it.

Meanwhile, the DPRK has made its goals, intentions, and determination no less clear, and offered the United States a binary choice of its own.

On December 30, 2017, North Korea's official KCNA news agency announced that Pyongyang would "...continue bolstering the capabilities for self-defense and preemptive attack with the nuclear force as the pivot as long as the U.S. and its vassal forces persist in nuclear threat..."<sup>17</sup>

That report was a prelude to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's dramatic policy statement made two days later in his annual New Year's address to the North Korean people. Kim declared that the North had "completed" its nuclear forces and that these forces were now a "reality." Kim warned: "The entire area of the U.S. mainland is within our nuclear strike range." Continuing, he said, "The United States can never start a war against me and our country." For those still harboring hopes for denuclearization, Kim said, "Our republic is finally in possession of a strong and reliable war deterrent that cannot be reversed by any power, anything." He also warned the United States: "Our nation's nuclear power

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<sup>17</sup> Ralph Ellis and Maeva Cuevas, "North Korea says it's not backing down on nuclear development in 2018," *CNN*, December 30, 2017, at: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/12/29/asia/north-korea-statement-on-nuclear-development/index.html>

can destroy and respond to any nuclear threat from the U.S. and act as a strong deterring power that suppresses the U.S. from playing with fire.”<sup>18</sup>

Kim’s remarks were the clearest and most authoritative statement of North Korea’s position on its nuclear status and capabilities as we have heard. The remarks also echo what North Korea’s diplomats have been privately telling U.S. interlocutors at unofficial dialogues for some time. In those talks, North Korean officials have variously declared: We are a nuclear weapons power; we will not give up our nuclear capabilities; we will not negotiate denuclearization; we have the ability to threaten the United States with nuclear weapons; we now have an effective nuclear deterrent; the United States can no longer attack us.

The message that North Korean officials have sought to convey to their U.S. counterparts in these dialogues is as sharply binary as that of the United States. North Korea has told the United States that the DPRK is now and forever a nuclear power, and that the United States must either accept it as such or risk war to end its nuclear pursuit. DPRK interlocutors have occasionally made the point using almost those exact words and with a remarkable degree of self-confidence. In doing so, they appear convinced that the United States and the international community will ultimately have no choice but to accept the “reality” that Kim Jong Un described in his January 1<sup>st</sup> speech.

Taken at face value, the North Korean position suggests there is no basis for a denuclearization dialogue with the United States. Taken literally, the North Korean position is a direct challenge to a United States that has declared it “cannot tolerate” a nuclear-armed North Korea. The self-confidence, bordering on arrogance, with which the North Korean position is usually conveyed suggests

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<sup>18</sup> Simon Denyer, “North Korean leader says he has ‘nuclear button’ but won’t use it unless threatened,” *Washington Post*, January 1, 2018, at: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/north-korea-leader-says-he-has-nuclear-button-but-wont-use-unless-threatened/2017/12/31/af3dc188-ee96-11e7-90ed-77167c6861f2\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.b6949c15c3b1](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/north-korea-leader-says-he-has-nuclear-button-but-wont-use-unless-threatened/2017/12/31/af3dc188-ee96-11e7-90ed-77167c6861f2_story.html?utm_term=.b6949c15c3b1); “Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s Address,” *National Committee on North Korea*, January 1, 2018, at: [https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju\\_2017\\_new\\_years\\_address.pdf/file\\_view](https://www.ncnk.org/resources/publications/kju_2017_new_years_address.pdf/file_view)

Pyongyang may believe the United States is bluffing when it hints at the possibility of military action. In the face of the explicit and implicit threats of military action being issued by the United States, such an assumption is irresponsible, delusional, and dangerous.

As 2018 begins, the positions staked out by Washington and Pyongyang could not be more in conflict. The starkness of the gap between the two sides suggests that the irresistible force of a United States determined not to allow North Korea to threaten it with nuclear weapons could soon meet the immovable object of a North Korea that has declared it will never give up its nuclear deterrent.

Meanwhile, in official circles in Washington, concern about the North Korean threat has grown apace. A sense of vulnerability and a belief that time is not on America's side has strengthened the view that there is a credible military option that could be employed against Pyongyang. It has also caused the administration to be skeptical of diplomacy and impatient with other approaches that seek to buy time or put off a final reckoning with North Korea.

Tensions are building to a new peak and the potential for miscalculation is perhaps greater than ever. In this environment, each of the above-mentioned assumptions and beliefs deserves questioning and reassessment. With the nuclear crisis on the verge of moving to a new and dangerous level, the moment could not be better for a serious review of the options and their consequences, frank consultations with allies and partners about those consequences, and straight talk with the American people and with allies about U.S. intentions. Such a review should include the most important question of all: How does this end?

### **The Military Option**

Any review should begin with a reality check of the assumptions behind and the likely consequences of the use of military force against North Korea. Reading between the lines of U.S. statements (and presidential tweets) about the possible

use of military force, there are a number of assumptions worth revisiting. One of the most fundamental is that the United States cannot rely on deterrence to prevent North Korea from using its nuclear weapons against American territory or a U.S. ally.

### **Will Deterrence Work?**

Inherent in this view is the belief that those U.S. strategic assets and the assurances of nuclear retaliation that prevented attack by the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and which today keep a nuclear-armed Russia and China at bay, will simply not work against North Korea. The argument occasionally made by some administration officials is that Pyongyang, unlike Moscow or Beijing, is not “rational” and does not comprehend the certainty of a U.S. response to a North Korean attack. Pyongyang might therefore risk using its nuclear weapons against America or its allies. As officials sometimes put it, the extreme nature of this brutal regime (and its equally brutal leader) means that the DPRK cannot be counted on to act “rationally.”

Another version of this argument holds that North Korea is determined to use its nuclear arsenal to reunify the Korean peninsula and it might opt to use its nuclear weapons against South Korea (or Japan), gambling that the United States would not come to the aid of its South Korean or Japanese allies. The argument is made that this is so dangerous a possibility that the United States has no choice but to prevent North Korea from ever developing the capabilities to act in this manner.

The above argument presupposes that this U.S. administration or a future one might be unprepared to push back against DPRK threats and intimidation. It suggests that Washington might ignore solemn treaty commitment to defend the Republic of Korea or Japan. It also assumes that the United States might be passive in the face of North Korean threats against America’s key Asian allies. Each of these possibilities seems inconceivable. The U.S. deterrent commitment,

including the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent, has been the bedrock of the U.S. regional alliance system for almost 70 years. There is simply no reason to believe, and no scenario that can be imagined, in which the United States would not be prepared to fulfill its alliance commitments.

It also strains credulity that the United States would stand by and allow its allies to be intimidated by a nuclear-armed North Korea without taking extraordinary steps to warn North Korea about the consequences of doing so. In recent years, for example, as North Korea has begun to build a small arsenal of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, the United States has reiterated and reinforced in tangible ways its extended deterrent commitment to its allies and warned North Korea in the starkest terms of the consequences of underestimating American resolve.

It is certainly true that North Korea may have the *intention* to alter the status quo on the Korean peninsula or in the region by threatening others with nuclear weapons in the future. But the fact is that any such goal is unachievable in the face of U.S. solidarity with its allies. North Korea understands (and should be made to continue to understand) that the use of a nuclear weapon to achieve its goals, or even the preparation for the use of a nuclear weapon to do so, would result in the end of the DPRK. Importantly, one of the strongest arguments for direct engagement with Pyongyang is to allow the United States to make that point directly to North Korea's leadership.

### **Is North Korea “Rational”?**

There is no dispute about the essential brutality of the North Korean regime and its leader. Having said that, Kim Jong Un is many things, but he is not suicidal, nor does he seek the destruction of his regime. The primary reason for North Korea's development of nuclear weapons is to guarantee the survival of the regime, not to bring about its destruction.

The highest goal to which the North Korean regime aspires is its own preservation in the face of what it portrays as threats and challenges, particularly from the United States. This is the omnipresent constant in much of North Korea's propaganda, particularly that directed at its own population.

In this context, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons aims to create an "insurance policy" that would allow the regime to guarantee its survival. This pursuit is a violation of international norms, a threat to peninsular and regional stability, a potential threat to the United States, and more. But in an important sense it is a "rational" (albeit objectionable). In this regard, North Korean interlocutors frequently remind their American counterparts that Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qaddafi fell because they failed to develop nuclear weapons to ensure their survival. As a senior DPRK diplomat once remarked to the author, "We will not make that mistake."

North Korea's behavior is troubling, provocative, daring, and often dangerous. But the regime's leadership understands that there are limits, even if it often seeks to test them. North Korea did precisely that when it sank the ROK corvette *Cheonan* and when it shelled South Korea's Yeonpyeong Island in 2010. The new, more robust allied rules of engagement that were adopted after those incidents made clear to the DPRK that further provocations would be met with force. Since then, North Korea has not engaged in a significant military provocation – a "rational" response to the prospect of assured retaliation.

North Korea may hope to eventually use its nuclear weapons to intimidate its neighbors and the United States, but such attempts are guaranteed to fail in the face of a determined United States and strong alliances. Pyongyang believes, and occasionally conveys to U.S. experts, that its limited nuclear arsenal guarantees that the United States will never attack the DPRK. But at the end of the day North Korea understands its vulnerability and is highly unlikely to take an action that would ensure its destruction. Constantly reminding North Korea of that

vulnerability, which has been a mainstay of the Trump administration's approach, makes good sense.

### **What If They Aren't Rational?**

Nevertheless, there is reason to be concerned about North Korean rationality. "Rational" powers occasionally do irrational things. Despite knowing the possible outcome of a war against America, Japan still attacked Pearl Harbor. Confronted with a massive, U.S.-led international coalition, Saddam Hussein opted to go to war rather than submit to U.S. demands. Could a desperate North Korea, captivated by its own propaganda and myths, opt to put its existence at risk by challenging the United States militarily? What if North Korea were convinced that the United States was bluffing about using military force against the DPRK? Might it launch an attack that would bring an overwhelming U.S. response? It is not impossible to imagine some circumstances under which North Korea might risk its treasured goal of regime survival.

Meanwhile, North Korea's threatening rhetoric, including promises to conduct "first strikes," provides reason for concern about whether Pyongyang fully comprehends the degree to which its growing nuclear capabilities actually increase the incentive for the United States to act before those capabilities reach a truly threatening level. Moreover, in meetings with American experts, DPRK representatives occasionally claim that the rules of deterrence "do not apply" to them and that they look forward to war to "settle" matters with America. Is this posturing, or is it the response of a delusional state that has come to believe its own propaganda?

Any discussion of rationality also compels the U.S. administration to ensure that American actions, internal discord, and occasional dysfunctionality do not send the wrong signal to our adversary (or our allies), including by suggesting that it is the United States that might act irrationally.



## The Consequences of Military Action

All these arguments and factors are worth careful consideration as Washington reviews the possible need to resort to military force against North Korea.

Needless to say, of paramount importance is the possibility that any military action against North Korea, regardless of scope, could lead to a broader conflict, including a second Korean War.

Much has been written about this possibility, including by expert military analysts, and there is little need to go into the details of this analysis here.<sup>19</sup> But it is important to emphasize that the array of forces and capabilities in North Korean hands is considerable. The DPRK is capable of inflicting considerable damage and destruction on South Korea and Japan, including major population centers in both countries, on U.S. bases in both countries, and on U.S. military personnel and civilians in both countries, in the event of a military conflict. And we cannot rule out that Pyongyang might choose to respond to a U.S. attack asymmetrically or against an unexpected target. A U.S. attack on a specific military target in North Korea could, for example, elicit a North Korean strike against a civilian target in Japan.

There is every reason to believe that, even if U.S. forces were able to carry out highly successful attacks against North Korean nuclear and missile sites, conventional forces, or command and control facilities, North Korea would still be able to use its remaining military capabilities, including concealed long-range artillery firing conventional, chemical, and biological shells; medium-range ballistic missiles, including some with nuclear warheads; special operations forces; and other capabilities to inflict considerable damage and casualties on

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<sup>19</sup> Kelly Magsamen and Ely Ratner, "An American attack on North Korea will come with epic consequences," *The Hill*, December 1, 2017, at: <http://thehill.com/opinion/national-security/362736-an-american-attack-on-north-korea-will-come-with-epic-consequences>; Ruben Gallego and Ted Lieu, "A war with North Korea would be hell: millions would die," *CNN*, December 1, 2017, at: <http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/30/opinions/millions-could-die-in-a-war-with-north-korea-opinion-gallego-lieu/index.html>

South Korea, Japan, and U.S. military bases in the Western Pacific. Estimates of casualties under these circumstances run from the hundreds of thousands to the millions.

In the event of a successful U.S. attack that was limited in scope – for example, against specific missile or nuclear facilities – the DPRK would have ample ability to respond along the lines described above. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a scenario in which, however successful the United States might be in carrying out an attack, North Korea does not have the ability to respond.

Of particular concern is the fact that U.S. officials, including the president himself, have implied that military action might be carried out unilaterally. The implications of such action, carried out either unilaterally or without adequate consultation and coordination with our South Korean ally, would be profound. Such action would call into question the fundamentals of our alliance with Seoul, and possibly with Tokyo, since both allies would be exposed to the likely North Korean response. As one South Korean observer remarked, such a scenario might cause the ROK to withhold the military cooperation that would be necessary to make the U.S. attack fully effective. The observer added that it would also lead to an outburst of anti-American sentiment and demonstrations in the Republic of Korea, endangering the alliance.<sup>20</sup>

This possibility should not be taken lightly. For almost seven decades, U.S. alliance partners have sought to affirm the firmness of the U.S. extended deterrent commitment by asking whether the U.S. was prepared to risk New York or Los Angeles to defend Seoul or Tokyo. The U.S. response to that question has always been “yes.” The effect of considering unilateral or uncoordinated military action against North Korea would be to tell our Korean and Japanese allies that the United States was prepared to put Seoul and Tokyo at risk in order to defend the American homeland.

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<sup>20</sup> Private conversation with author, December 14, 2017.

Finally, some in the Trump administration appear to believe there exists a military option against North Korea that would not put its South Korean ally at grave risk.<sup>21</sup> Based on private conversations with administration officials and exchanges with former senior U.S. military officers, this view seems to be based on the idea that North Korea fears the U.S. strategic arsenal so much, and values the survival of its regime so highly, that it would not respond to a U.S. attack, particularly if that attack were limited in scope, lest it suffer a massive response by the United States.

This argument assigns a high level of “rationality” to North Korean strategic thinking, and in doing so contradicts the argument some in the U.S. administration are making that Pyongyang is irrational. But, as argued previously, North Korea *does* fear the U.S. strategic arsenal and Pyongyang *does* hold as its highest priority the preservation of its regime and system. But is this goal so important to Pyongyang that it would be willing to do little or nothing in response to a U.S. attack of any scope? And if the U.S. plan were to carry out a limited strike, how would Pyongyang know that the goal of an attack was limited? And if the DPRK leadership decided that a U.S. attack was aimed at ending the regime, why would North Korea not use every weapon in its arsenal to prevent this from happening?

For U.S. planners trying to slow or stop North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, the idea that North Korea might be willing to undergo an attack and not respond militarily might be an intriguing, even tempting, hypothesis. But it is a hypothesis that has never been tested, and the cost of doing so might be the loss of hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of Korean, Japanese, and American lives. For that reason alone, the potential use of military

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<sup>21</sup> Helene Cooper, “Mattis Leaves the Door Open to Military Options in North Korea,” *The New York Times*, September 18, 2017, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/18/world/asia/mattis-north-korea-military.html>

force, especially at this delicate juncture, requires the closest possible scrutiny and reconsideration.

### **“Accepting” a Nuclear-Armed North Korea**

As an alternative option, Washington is being pressed – both by Kim Jong Un himself and by prominent U.S. former officials -- to accommodate itself to the reality of a nuclear-armed North Korea. Some experts are urging the Trump administration to accept that North Korea will never give up its nuclear weapons and to focus U.S. policy on limiting the danger such weapons pose to the United States and its allies.

Proposals in this area include the idea of trying to negotiate a “cap” on the number of nuclear weapons that Pyongyang could possess. Another idea is to “freeze” the DPRK’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs at their current levels, i.e., before they become an even greater danger, in the hope that the passage of time and reliance on diplomacy might lead to a solution in the future. In the meantime, this proposal argues that the U.S. rely on the efficacy of the freeze itself and the traditional role of deterrence to “manage” the threat from North Korea.

### **Non-Starters**

The Trump administration has shown no enthusiasm for these proposals, or for the several variations on these ideas that have been proposed. Since the essence of its policy is refusal to accept, tolerate, or live with a North Korean nuclear threat, the Trump administration sees such ideas as fundamentally unacceptable in principle. The administration appears unwilling to consider any alternative that would leave in place a permanently nuclear-armed North Korea that could threaten the United States homeland.

The Trump administration also understands the strong South Korean and Japanese opposition to the idea of allowing the North Korean threat against them to remain in place. Of particular concern to America's Asian allies is the possibility that Washington might be willing to allow Pyongyang to retain those systems that threaten its immediate neighbors as part of a "deal" that eliminates the threat to the United States homeland.

Were Washington to go down this path, opposition from Seoul and Tokyo would be strong. Faced with a U.S. decision to effectively decouple its own defense from that of its allies, South Korea and Japan would likely question the U.S. extended deterrent commitment and perhaps even contemplate developing their own nuclear deterrent.

Allowing North Korea to remain a de facto nuclear-weapons state would be a significant blow to the global nuclear non-proliferation regime. It would legitimize North Korea's breakout from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), validate and effectively accept Pyongyang's defiance of the UN Security Council, and enable the DPRK to resume its proliferation activities. It would set the worst possible precedent for dealing with Iran, which would surely draw all the wrong lessons from such an arrangement.

The Trump administration appears particularly opposed to proposals that call for the United States to reciprocate a "freeze" of the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs by reducing the scope or number of U.S. or U.S.-ROK conventional military exercises. Arguments against this approach have focused on the fact that it would create a moral equivalency between legitimate defensive exercises conducted by the U.S. and its South Korean ally on the one hand, and North Korea's illegal pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles on the other. There are also concerns that such an arrangement would result in the attrition of U.S.-ROK conventional readiness, with no corresponding reduction in North Korean exercises or conventional capabilities.

Perhaps the most important criticism is that most freeze-related proposals necessarily only limit the DPRK's nuclear weapons testing and ballistic missile launches. Since Pyongyang has consistently ruled out on-the-ground inspection or monitoring, such an arrangement would effectively allow the DPRK to continue all of its nuclear and missile activities short of actual testing.

This would be a freeze in name only, since North Korea has demonstrated over the years a remarkable ability to develop its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles even without physical testing.

No less importantly, since Pyongyang has already conducted significant missile and nuclear testing, this arrangement would still enable the North to produce additional fissile material, nuclear weapons, and ballistic missiles, even as a purported "freeze" was in place. And even if the DPRK were to allow monitoring or inspection, the record shows that even with safeguards in place North Korea has been able to surreptitiously develop alternative fissile material production facilities, nuclear weapons, and the means to deliver them.

Despite these and other arguments opposing such arrangements, proponents of "caps" or "freezes" remain a vocal and influential force in the United States. Appealing to the U.S. administration's concerns about the DPRK's emerging nuclear and missile capabilities, supporters of a freeze argue that, short of war, the best way to prevent Pyongyang from developing the ability to threaten the American homeland is by freezing its WMD programs at their current level. However, freeze proponents tend to have little to say about the flaws in the freeze concept described earlier, nor do they usually address the alliance-related implications of leaving North Korea in possession of a nuclear arsenal, or the danger that such an arsenal would continue to pose to U.S. regional bases and overseas territories.

To the extent that freeze proponents engage on these latter issues, it is generally to reiterate the traditional role of deterrence and the track record deterrence has had in keeping the peace. While such an argument is important, it fails to take into account the potential for irrationality by North Korea, the North's rhetorical rejection of deterrence noted previously, and the fact that, by going down this path, the United States will have legitimized the DPRK's illegal pursuit of nuclear weapons and allowed a new threat against the United States and its allies to remain in place.

Despite their shortcomings and the U.S. administration's clear opposition, the arguments, presumptions, and assumptions of those pressing for a freeze or cap deserve careful review and consideration, especially if the United States opts not to pursue a military solution, or if the other major remaining option, massive pressure, fails to yield an acceptable solution.

### **Massive Pressure and Compelling a Different Choice**

Those who have criticized the Trump administration for not having a North Korea policy will be disappointed to hear that it actually has two policies, and it is pursuing them simultaneously. The administration's problem is that the policies contradict each other.

The first policy centers on dealing with what the administration sees as the compelling urgency of the emerging nuclear challenge from North Korea. That threat is deemed to be so dangerous to the American homeland that it may require the use of military force to end it. No less a figure than the U.S. president has spoken to this issue, and he and senior figures in his administration have called the threat intolerable and unacceptable.

Much has been said or implied about the prospect of U.S. military action. The central message that has been conveyed to North Korea by the Trump administration's rhetoric is that Pyongyang should not doubt American resolve

and determination to deal with the nuclear threat, including by military means, if necessary. As 2017 drew to a close, the U.S. administration made a point of emphasizing that time is running out for a peaceful solution, implying that a decision to use military force might be made sooner rather than later.

The ironic counterpart to this policy of possible near-term military action is a U.S. approach that by its nature requires patience, coalition building, multilateralism, alliance solidarity, and, no less importantly, time. It is an approach that relies heavily on diplomacy and one that, if it succeeds, would result in dialogue and diplomacy with North Korea aimed at ending its pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The latter approach of course is the Trump administration's "maximum pressure and dialogue" policy, which represents the third major option before Washington today. While leaving the door open to dialogue and diplomacy if Pyongyang is prepared to discuss denuclearization, the Trump administration has used this approach both to prevent North Korea from realizing its nuclear and missile ambitions and to massively raise the cost to Pyongyang if it continues to pursue them.

The "maximum pressure" approach draws on lessons learned from the failure of past U.S. policy. The core lesson of this experience has been that if the goal is to compel North Korea to resume denuclearization, then the United States and the international community must convince North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that by continuing to develop nuclear weapons, he will not only be unable to guarantee his regime's survival, but will also risk hastening the end of his regime. This approach seeks to force Kim to choose between nuclear weapons and survival, and is based on the assessment that, in the end, regime preservation will be more important to Kim than nuclear weapons.

The tools to achieve this end involve a broad range of sanctions and other measures, both unilateral and multilateral, applied in an unprecedentedly intense



and comprehensive fashion, coordinated with the UN Security Council and with U.S. allies and partners. The tools it employs include trade and economic sanctions, diplomatic steps, banking measures, human rights pressures, military steps (including exercises and new deployments to the Korean peninsula), and actions in the cyber realm.

The approach goes well beyond the incremental approaches of the past. It is designed to squeeze and isolate North Korea, cut off its trade, dry up its foreign exchange earnings, reduce its overseas diplomatic presence, sanction its senior officials and major firms, cut off North Korean banks from the international clearing system, and in general create the darkest possible picture of the regime's future for Kim Jong Un and North Korea's elites.

Thanks to unusually strong UN Security Council sanctions, including the measures adopted unanimously by the UNSC on December 22, 2017, this approach has reduced North Korean exports and imports of strategic commodities in ways likely to have a profound impact on the North Korean economy. When fully implemented, UNSC Resolution 2397 will cut off some 90% of the DPRK's import of refined petroleum products, similarly cap its import of crude oil, and mandate the repatriation of overseas North Korean laborers over the next 24 months.

The oil-related measures will significantly affect North Korea's industrial and transportation sectors. They will force North Korea to draw down its petroleum reserves to sustain its industrial sector. The resolution's ban on the exports of heavy machinery and industrial equipment will have a major effect, as will the prohibition on North Korea's export of all agricultural and seafood products and minerals – two of the mainstays of the DPRK's export economy.

This latest UNSC action is the most far-reaching and aggressive of an increasingly tough series of steps taken by the international community against North Korea. It has taken the application of sanctions and related measures

against the DPRK into important new territory. Together with unilateral measures being implemented by the United States and its allies and partners, the totality of the unilateral and multilateral measures now being applied on North Korea is unprecedented in scope and intensity.

It is not yet clear whether this new approach will prove more effective than previous efforts to sanction and punish the DPRK. But it is precisely because of their comprehensive, overwhelming, and unprecedented nature that these new measures offer real hope for changing Pyongyang's calculation and its policy.

To be fully effective, the new measures being applied against North Korea will have to remain in place for some time. If North Korea engages in additional nuclear or missile tests, the measures are likely to be strengthened, including by imposing a UN-sanctioned maritime and air quarantine and by further reducing the North's access to crude oil and petroleum products.

While there is no guarantee that this approach will succeed in bringing North Korea to the negotiating table, the approach is worth pursuing intensively precisely because it has never been done before, and because all other approaches have failed.

At the end of the day, the prospect of a hopeless future and the potential of economic collapse may convince Pyongyang that there is a better way forward. Until it makes such a decision, and as the pressure on North Korea mounts, the U.S. will have to contend with a period during which the DPRK will try to advance its nuclear and missile programs, although Pyongyang will have to do so with rapidly shrinking resources. This is admittedly a gamble.

If the approach succeeds, the international community, including the United States, will be in a position to offer the DPRK an exit ramp and a way to a better future in return for its denuclearization. But the approach could fail. China and

Russia may continue to try to evade sanctions and continue the surreptitious flow of oil and other support for Pyongyang. Or we may discover that North Korea is so wedded to its need for nuclear weapons that it is prepared to endure an unprecedented level of pain and isolation to keep them.

In that event, the United States and its allies and partners will have to seek another way to deal with North Korea. At that point, a force-based approach, or an approach based on regime change, may become necessary. If that occurs, however, the U.S. and its partners will be dealing with a North Korea that is considerably weaker and more vulnerable than the DPRK is today.

### **A Final Word**

None of the above options is ideal, but if the choice has to be made among the three options, a policy of massive pressure and isolation seems more prudent than a resort to near-term military conflict, and more secure than acceding to the idea of a permanently nuclear-armed North Korea.

The decisions that the Trump administration makes regarding its options will have profound implications for peace and stability on the Korean peninsula and in the Northeast Asia region. Washington's decisions will be no less consequential for America's alliance ties, the credibility of America's commitments to the defense of its allies, and the security of the American homeland.

Regardless of the ultimate approach that the U.S. administration adopts, the stakes involved with each of the above options are such that it is imperative for the U.S. leadership, and the American people, to think through the consequences of each of them with the utmost care. It will be no less important for America's allies to do so as well. We must ensure we know how this ends.

