

BACKGROUND

No. 3308 | MAY 3, 2018

U.S. Should Counter North Korea's Strategic Objectives During Summit Meeting

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Abstract

Within a few short months, the North Korean nuclear situation has shifted dramatically from a seemingly inevitable military clash to potential diplomatic breakthroughs. Given the lengthy record of diplomatic failures in curbing the North Korean nuclear program, it is prudent to be cautious in trusting reports that the regime is now willing to abandon its nuclear arsenal. That is not to say the U.S. should not try again, but engagement should be based on a thorough knowledge of past efforts. The best policy for the U.S. is a comprehensive strategy of deterrence, containment, pressure, and eventual regime change.

President Donald Trump's rapid acceptance of North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's summit meeting invitation was yet another stunning turn in a whirlwind of developments on the Korean Peninsula this year. Within a few short months, the situation has shifted dramatically from a seemingly inevitable military clash to potential diplomatic breakthroughs.

North Korea appears to have reversed its long-standing resistance to abandoning its nuclear arsenal. After meeting with Kim Jong-un, a senior South Korean delegation announced Pyongyang had "clearly expressed its commitment to the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula."¹ The North also pledged a moratorium on any further nuclear or missile tests, abandoning its earlier demand for a reciprocal freeze on U.S.–South Korean military exercises.

But a careful reading of Pyongyang's offer shows it comes with heavy strings attached and is consistent with enduring regime objectives. The South Korean description of the meeting, as well as subsequent North Korean statements, suggests traditional regime

KEY POINTS

- North Korea appears to have reversed its long-standing resistance to abandoning its nuclear arsenal. But a careful reading of Pyongyang's offer shows it comes with heavy strings attached and is consistent with enduring regime objectives.
- The South Korean description of the planned meeting, as well as subsequent North Korean statements, suggest traditional regime demands for conditionality and reciprocity.
- Even during negotiations, the North will continue to augment and refine its missile and nuclear capabilities. Washington and its allies must keep their eyes open, their shields up, and their swords sharp.
- The best policy for the U.S. is a comprehensive strategy of deterrence, containment, pressure, and eventual regime change. Washington should take advantage of a multi-pronged negotiation strategy in discussions with North Korean leaders.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <http://report.heritage.org/bg3308>

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demands for conditionality and reciprocity. All previous attempts at diplomatic resolution of the North Korean nuclear issue have failed—so there is good reason to be skeptical and wary.

Prior to his meeting with Kim, President Trump should be aware of North Korea's military threat as well as its long-standing regime objectives and negotiating tactics. Being cognizant of these factors could help reduce the likelihood of repeating past mistakes.

North Korea's Growing Nuclear Threat.

Since assuming power in 2011, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has exponentially increased testing of nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them against the United States and its allies. In 2017 alone, Pyongyang launched 25 missiles. Experts assess that the regime has 30 or more nuclear weapons. In 2017, North Korea tested a weapon with at least 10 times the explosive power of those used in 1945—indicating it has developed highly destructive hydrogen bombs.

Pyongyang likely has the ability to hit South Korea and Japan with nuclear weapons on medium-range ballistic missiles. The regime also has chemical and biological weapons programs, the latter demonstrated when it used deadly VX nerve agent to assassinate Kim's half-brother in a crowded civilian airport in Indonesia. Pyongyang is also nearing deployment of intermediate-range missiles to threaten critical U.S. military bases in Guam, a key node in the defense of U.S. allies in Asia.

North Korea is on the cusp of achieving the ability to threaten the American homeland with nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). In 2017, the regime successfully tested two ICBM variants that demonstrated the ability to reach the entire continental United States. CIA Director Mike Pompeo warned that the regime may complete the program within "a handful of months."²

Pyongyang has frequently threatened to use its nuclear weapons to turn Washington into a "sea of fire." The regime also announced that some of its

missile launches were practicing nuclear airbursts against U.S. bases in South Korea and Japan.

For decades, debate has raged over North Korea's motivations for developing nuclear weapons. Initially, the dispute was whether Pyongyang was building a military capability or a mere negotiating chip to be bargained away for economic and diplomatic benefits. Today, some experts assess North Korea only seeks a sufficient nuclear arsenal to deter a U.S. attack. Conversely, others perceive a desire to use nuclear weapons to achieve unification of the Korean Peninsula on the North's terms or to attack the United States.

Understanding North Korea's Strategic Objectives

The U.S. Intelligence Community has "long assessed that Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities are intended for deterrence, international prestige, and coercive diplomacy."³ From Pyongyang's perspective, having nuclear weapons makes eminent sense since it concurrently fulfills a number of long-standing foreign policy objectives:

- Regime survival by deterring allied attacks or retaliations in response to North Korean provocations;
- Source of national pride by achieving recognition as a nuclear state and equal status with the U.S.;
- Domestic legitimacy and international prestige for leadership;
- Tremendous military power to overcome deficiencies in conventional forces to achieve reunification;
- Formidable leverage for coercive diplomacy to wrest concessions and benefits; and
- Undermine the U.S.–South Korean alliance by sowing doubt that Washington would come to

1. "South, North Korea Agree to Hold 3rd Summit in April," Cheong Wa Dae, March 6, 2018, https://english1.president.go.kr/korea/korea.php?srh%5Bview_mode%5D=detail&srh%5Bseq%5D=20279 (accessed April 18, 2018).

2. John Haltiwanger, "North Korea 'Handful of Months' From Being Able to Hit U.S. With Nuclear Weapon, CIA Director Warns," *Newsweek*, January 22, 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/north-korea-handful-months-being-able-hit-us-nuclear-weapon-cia-director-warns-786706> (accessed April 18, 2018).

3. Jason Thomson, "What Can Be Done to Deflect North Korea's Nuclear Ambitions?" *Christian Science Monitor*, February 9, 2016, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Global-News/2016/0209/What-can-be-done-to-deflect-North-Korea-s-nuclear-ambitions> (accessed April 18, 2018).

Seoul's defense once the American homeland is under nuclear threat.

Regime Survival. Kim Jong-un claims his nuclear force constitutes “a powerful deterrent that prevents [the U.S.] from starting an adventurous war. In no way would the United States dare to ignite a war against me and our country.”⁴ Pyongyang justifies its nuclear weapons as guaranteed protection against the U.S. “hostile policy” of intimidation, military attacks, and regime change against authoritarian regimes.

Pyongyang's military threats, including colorful phrases such as turning Washington and Seoul into a “sea of fire,” are usually issued in a conditional context by depicting them as a response to a unilateral U.S. attack. Kim Jong-un declared, “As a responsible nuclear weapons state, our Republic will not use a nuclear weapon unless its sovereignty is encroached upon by any aggressive hostile forces with nukes.”⁵

North Korea Stands Defiantly Alone. Contrary to widespread misperception of a close Chinese–North Korean political relationship, Pyongyang feels threatened by its neighbor since Beijing agreed to U.N. sanctions against North Korea. All three generations of North Korean leadership have warned of the dangers of Chinese intimidation. A traditional Korean adage depicts the peninsula as a “shrimp amongst whales.”

The North Korean policy of *juche* (self-reliance) was born of the necessity of maintaining its sovereignty by remaining independent from coercion even by its allies. It has since become a source of national pride.

The North Korean nuclear program is a manifestation of this philosophy. It began in the 1960s based on the perception that the regime could not rely on either of its superpower allies, the Soviet Union or China, for its defense. Moscow was seen as having abandoned Havana during the Cuban missile crisis, and Beijing refused to share information from its nuclear tests.

North Korea sees attaining nuclear status as bestowing an equal status with that of the United States. North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho told the U.N. General Assembly that Pyongyang's ultimate goal is to “establish the balance of power with the U.S.”⁶

Leadership Legitimacy. Even more than his father and grandfather, Kim Jong-un has linked his personal prestige to the country's nuclear and ICBM programs. Lacking the revolutionary credentials or lengthy government tenure of his predecessors, Kim embraces the programs and the breakthroughs of recent years as his exclusive contribution to fulfilling long-standing regime objectives and defending the country.

North Korean official media frequently release photos of Kim attending missile launches, lauding him as the visionary and driving force. Kim is thus able to convey an image of infallibility and invincibility, which helps secure his control of power. By declaring that the nuclear button is on his desk, Kim portrays himself as uniquely qualified to defend the country.

Military Capability. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate weapons and provide the regime with the power to wreak havoc on its neighbors and the United States. Pyongyang already has the ability to target South Korea and Japan with nuclear weapons and is nearing completion of longer-range missiles to hit U.S. bases in Guam and the American homeland.

North Korea is developing several means to ensure greater survivability of its missile forces, enhancing both a preemptive first-strike and retaliatory second-strike capability. Pyongyang is testing several different solid-fueled missiles that require less fueling time, along with mobile ground-based launchers and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The regime has also practiced missile launches under wartime conditions by firing them from diverse locations throughout the country and conducting salvo launches of several missiles simultaneously.

4. Joshua Keating, “Kim and Trump Don't Mean the Same Thing When They Talk About ‘Denuclearization,’” *Slate*, March 28, 2018, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2018/03/kim-and-trump-dont-mean-the-same-thing-when-they-talk-about-denuclearization.html> (accessed April 18, 2018).

5. “North Korea ‘Will Not Use Nuclear Weapons’ Unless Threatened,” BBC News, May 8, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36240040> (accessed April 18, 2018).

6. Edith M. Lederer, “North Korean Diplomat Says Tweet by Trump ‘Declared War,’” *U.S. News and World Report*, September 25, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-09-25/north-korea-says-trump-has-declared-war-on-his-country> (accessed April 18, 2018).

Enhancing Coercive Diplomacy. Attaining an unambiguous nuclear ICBM capability could lead Pyongyang to perceive it has immunity from any international response—and thus lead the regime to act even more belligerently and seek to intimidate the U.S. and its allies into accepting North Korea diktats. The regime could also use rising international fear of its nuclear prowess to pressure other Six Party Talks participants to abandon denuclearization as their goal and instead accept limitations on North Korea’s nuclear programs in return for diplomatic and economic concessions.

Decoupling the Alliances. North Korea has long sought to drive a wedge between the U.S. and its partners by depicting Seoul’s alliance with Washington as the impediment to improved inter-Korean relations and eventual reunification. Characteristically, Kim Jong-un declared in his 2018 New Year’s Day speech, “[T]he north and the south improve the relations between themselves and take decisive measures for achieving a breakthrough for independent reunification”⁷ without U.S. interference. Doing so, however, requires South Korea to “discontinue all the nuclear war drills they stage with outside forces [and] refrain from any acts of bringing in nuclear armaments and aggressive forces from the United States.”

Pyongyang’s approaching ability to target the continental U.S. with nuclear weapons has aggravated allies’ concerns about U.S. capability, resolve, and willingness to defend their countries. This trend is most prevalent in South Korea, which fears a decoupled alliance in which the U.S. “wouldn’t trade Los Angeles for Seoul.” This, coupled with growing anxiety that the U.S. is contemplating a preventive attack on North Korea, has led some in South Korea to advocate a more independent policy from Washington.

Using Negotiations to Achieve Regime Objectives

For decades, North Korea was able to keep the world at bay as it surreptitiously pursued nuclear weapons and ICBM programs, first in secret, then while maintaining sufficient strategic ambiguity to derail international efforts to prevent it, and finally in open defiance of U.N. resolutions. The regime was able to do so through a comprehensive multi-faceted strategy of deny, deceive, and delay.

Pyongyang attained its goals through formal and informal diplomatic means, manipulating parallel channels of engagement, and playing opponents against each other to maximize leverage. North Korea deflected criticism of its intransigence and repeated violations of U.N. resolutions by blaming the U.S. “hostile policy” toward the regime.

Preparing the Battlefield: Demanding a Price for Attending Negotiations. North Korea often achieved several objectives prior to even entering the negotiating venue. Pyongyang would fortify its bargaining position by conditioning its return on receiving preliminary concessions from its opponents as well as determining the agenda so that it reflected North Korean policy priorities.

By holding out the promise of returning to the talks rather than issuing an outright rejection, North Korea sought to portray itself as a reasonable negotiating partner. Pyongyang would signal it was interested in resuming negotiations while concurrently rejecting U.S. preconditions by characterizing them as insufficient. Doing so put Washington on the defensive and susceptible to additional pressure from China—as well as South Korea, during progressive administrations—to provide greater U.S. “flexibility.”

“Good Cop, Bad Cop”: Creating the Illusion of Factionalism. North Korea has long cultivated the image of factional infighting between “engagers” and “hardliners” as a negotiating tool. Instead, the Ministries of Foreign Affairs and Defense were simply playing their roles of good cop and bad cop in order to gain maximum diplomatic and economic benefits. In the words of a Korean adage, “the same animal has sharp claws and soft fur.”

Some analysts interpreted alternating benign and hostile statements from different North Korean ministries as indicative of a power struggle between factions competing for influence over former leader Kim Jong-il. In fact, Kim determined the message to be sent and simply chose the appropriate channel to deliver his message *du jour*. Kim’s tactics, however, led some experts to advocate strengthening the North Korean “soft liners” by offering yet more concessions. Doing so, they argued, would convince Kim Jong-il that there are benefits to negotiating with the outside world.

Engagement advocates also excused belligerent North Korean behavior as the understandable and

7. “Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s Address,” The National Committee on North Korea, <https://www.ncnk.org/node/1427> (accessed April 18, 2018).

acceptable result of Kim Jong-il having to temporarily adopt a firmer policy to prevent a hardliner coup or to purchase support for Kim's son as successor.

Raising Brinksmanship to an Art Form. Pyongyang escalated tensions to define negotiating parameters and extract maximum benefits for minimal concessions. North Korean brinksmanship raised the price of an eventual deal, slowed down the negotiating process until opponents were willing to meet North Korean terms, and created a parallel crisis to divert attention from a negotiating impasse.

North Korea's escalation is opportunistic rather than reactive to U.S. actions. By moving up the escalatory ladder, North Korea retains the initiative and controls the pace of the game, forcing the U.S. and others to respond. Raising tensions may gain Pyongyang what it desires—or at least expose fault lines in a coalition that North Korea can then exploit. Pyongyang believes it can force the United States to negotiate either by applying leverage directly on Washington or indirectly through its allies.

Carefully Calibrating Crises. Even when using belligerent rhetoric and threatening actions, Pyongyang was careful to avoid crossing the Rubicon of a crisis. The regime allowed itself a means to de-escalate the situation or force its opponents to accept a new status quo through “creeping normalcy.”

If Pyongyang perceives it has risked going too far, it will implement a tactical retreat in order to protect a strategic gain. The regime may backtrack to undermine international consensus for punishing North Korea. For example, after conducting its first nuclear test in October 2006, Pyongyang realized it had angered its protectors in Beijing and the progressive government in Seoul.

After the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution imposing penalties, North Korea offered to return to the Six Party Talks. Pyongyang calculated it could best reach its goal of ending sanctions by temporarily switching to conciliatory diplomacy.

Two-Track Diplomatic Strategy. Pyongyang often used a combination of threats and assurances to garner diplomatic and economic support from China, Russia, and South Korea by raising the specter of a deteriorating security situation.

Pyongyang's two-track strategy complicated U.S. attempts to gain Chinese and Russian support for imposing sanctions. North Korea's seeming reasonableness encouraged Beijing and Moscow to resist tough enforcement of the trade sanctions, let alone

U.S. demands for additional sanctions beyond those mandated by the U.N.

Inching Across the Red Line. Pyongyang used years of negotiating foot-dragging and delays to augment its stockpile from an estimated one to two nuclear weapons at the end of the 1990s to a more robust nuclear arsenal today.

Under Kim Jong-il, North Korea's strategy had been to slowly build toward an escalatory act, thereby allowing the U.S. and its allies sufficient time to offer new diplomatic or economic inducements. On those occasions when North Korea carried out the act, it followed with several months of calm to allow all countries to become accustomed to the new, elevated *status quo* prior to initiating the next lengthy provocation process.

Unlike his father, Kim Jong-un had until recently eschewed engagement, maneuvering for negotiations, and charm offensives. Kim *filis* preferred an all-out sprint to cross the finish line of a viable nuclear weapons and ICBM capability. He lost an opportunity to induce liberal Presidents Obama and Moon Jae-in to offer benefits and move away from pressure tactics. Kim's hardline strategy drove the international community into greater consensus on the need to punish and pressure the recalcitrant regime.

Kim's 2018 New Year's Day speech marked a turning point in strategy as he extended an olive branch to South Korea, which was quickly grasped by President Moon to lower tensions on the peninsula. Seoul was concerned about North Korean provocations—or even a military attack prior to the Winter Olympics in South Korea. In 1987, North Korean agents blew up a South Korean airliner, killing 115 people, in part to disrupt the 1988 Olympics in Seoul.

Bilateral inter-Korean discussions led to an agreement for a North Korean team to join the Olympics in South Korea and then to a North–South Korea summit to be held on April 27 of this year.

Too High Cost. If Kim is willing to return to nuclear negotiations, it would come with a price. Pyongyang has always coupled diplomatic outreach with a lengthy list of demands, including:

- **Military:** The end of U.S.–South Korean military exercises, removal of U.S. troops from South Korea, abrogation of the bilateral defense alliance between the U.S. and South Korea, cancellation of the U.S. extended-deterrence guarantee,

and worldwide dismantlement of all U.S. nuclear weapons;

- **Political:** Establishment of formal diplomatic relations with the U.S., signing of a peace treaty to end the Korean War, and no action on the U.N. Commission of Inquiry report on North Korean human rights abuses;
- **Law enforcement:** Removal of all U.N. sanctions, U.S. sanctions, EU sanctions, and targeted financial measures; and
- **Societal:** Restrictions on South Korean constitutionally protected freedoms of speech and assembly, such as “insulting” articles by South Korean media and anti-North Korean public demonstrations in Seoul.

How Washington Should Counter North Korea’s Negotiating Tactics

As President Trump prepares for his forthcoming summit with Kim Jong-un, he should:

- **Insist that North Korea agree to clearly delineated parameters for discussion.** These should include insistence on complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs (as required by U.N. resolution).
- **Avoid accepting vaguely worded agreements.** Normally a presidential summit would occur after lengthy diplomatic meetings at lower echelons that hammered out a final agreement. By switching to a top-down approach, it is more likely that the summit will focus on an announced framework for subsequent negotiations. Even this should be clear in its objectives, as opposed to past failed efforts that relied on vague texts, which allowed progress but at the cost of follow-on disputes from differing interpretations.
- **Not offer reductions in sanctions as an initial bargaining chip.** Too often in the past, the U.S. or South Korea offered preliminary concessions in hopes of gaining reciprocal North Korean actions. While U.N. sanctions that constrain or prohibit North Korean trade could eventually be reduced in return for progress on denuclear-

ization, doing so would require U.N. consensus. However, unilateral U.S. targeted financial measures, such as those defending the U.S. financial system, are law enforcement rather than diplomatic measures—and should not be abandoned. If North Korea ceases the illegal behavior that triggers the measures, then the regime will no longer feel their effects.

- **Call for North Korea to affirm commitment to previous agreements.** These include previous international denuclearization accords, such as the Agreed Framework, but also the armistice ending the Korean War and the inter-Korean Basic Agreement, which Pyongyang has abrogated.
- **Recommend discussions on confidence and security-building confidence measures.** As was done in agreements between NATO and the Warsaw Pact, such measures can reduce tensions and the potential for miscalculation and conflict by augmenting transparency and notification procedures for military exercises and deployments.
- **Continue strong coordination with South Korea and Japan.** As the U.S. learned during negotiations on the bilateral U.S.–North Korean Agreed Framework, allies get nervous when they are not in the room. Washington must prevent Pyongyang from seeking to drive a wedge amongst the allies by closely communicating and coordinating common policies to ensure all countries’ strategic interests are addressed.

Conclusion

Differing interpretations of North Korean motivation for its nuclear weapons influence U.S. policy debate. A belief that the primary regime objective is defensive generally leads to advocacy for pursuing an initial freeze of the nuclear program to be followed by terms for denuclearization.

At the other end of the spectrum, an assessment that Pyongyang’s dominant reason for a nuclear arsenal is to invade South Korea and achieve Korean unification through intimidation or force leads to advocacy for a U.S. preventive attack before Pyongyang achieves ICBM capability.

A middle viewpoint is that the North’s nuclear weapons are more than a benign defense mechanism

but that the regime is unlikely to initiate an invasion as long as the U.S.–South Korean alliance remains strong. The best policy for the U.S. is a comprehensive strategy of deterrence, containment, pressure, and eventual regime change.

Given the lengthy record of diplomatic failures in curbing the North Korean nuclear program, it is prudent to be cautious of trusting reports that the regime is now willing to abandon its nuclear arsenal. That is not to say the U.S. should not try again, but engagement should be based on a thorough knowledge of past efforts. Even during negotiations, the North will continue to augment and refine its missile and nuclear capabilities. Washington and its allies must keep their eyes open, their shields up, and their swords sharp.

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