

Symposium Nuclear Weapons and the Korean Peninsula

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of State Rex Tillerson suggested in December 2017 that the US was ready to talk without preconditions. The White House quickly backtracked, saying the US policy toward North Korea remained unchanged. The conflicting views reflect the lack of consensus even within the US government on how to deal with North Korea.

There are basically three approaches to address North Korea's nuclear issue: continuation of the sanction-based policy, military action, or returning to negotiations. The US-preferred sanction-based policy has obviously failed to curb North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Any military action will have unbearable consequences for all parties, especially the Korean people. South Korean President Moon Jae-in has insisted that no US-led war on the Korean peninsula will be allowed without South Korea's consent. The only viable option is to return to the negotiation table, despite its shortcomings.

A blind spot in the current debate about North Korea is a fundamental question that is barely asked: why does North Korea want to develop nuclear weapons? If the international community can create conditions under which North Koreans feel it unnecessary to maintain nuclear weapons, this problem may automatically disappear.

Denuclearization is an objective, not a precondition, for peaceful talks. Without security guarantees from the US, it might be wishful thinking to expect North Korea to voluntarily denuclearize. The international community may have to be prepared to accept North Korea as a de facto nuclear state. Possessing nuclear weapons does not necessarily make North Korea more dangerous; it's the intention to use them that does. North Korean leaders are not irrational or suicidal. They are unlikely to use nuclear weapons without provocation. If North Korea is

fully welcomed into the international system, it will not have the incentive to use those weapons. A softer approach toward the North has the potential to achieve this ultimate objective.

In 2008, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra paid a historic visit to P'yongyang, where it performed to a polite and enthusiastic audience. When "The Star-Spangled Banner" was played, the fascinated North Korean audience reportedly all stood up and showed respect to America. The two Koreas have marched together under one flag at international sporting events such as the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney, Australia, and the 2018 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea. Promoting cultural exchanges and welcoming North Korea into the international community represent a better approach.

"War made the state, and the state made war," asserted sociologist and political scientist Charles Tilly. By the same token, states make peace, and peace can make a new state out of North Korea. With concerted efforts by all relevant parties, peace is within reach and sustainable on the Korean peninsula. ■

A New North Korean Paradigm

By Jacques Fuqua



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US policy toward North Korea has undergone a seismic shift in the wake of the 2017 US presidential inauguration, from "strategic patience" to "strategic accountability." The world has also borne witness to a darker side of that policy shift, characterized by an escalating war of words between the United States and North Korea, or more specifically between its two leaders. Bluster-filled news headlines (and Twitter feeds) with a tenor reminiscent of Cold War-era histrionics have become the preferred method of dialogue—"Fire and Fury,"¹ "Locked and Loaded,"² and the public comparison of nuclear button sizes.³

While such attention-grabbing headlines do little to advance greater nuclear stability, either on the Korean peninsula or within the region, they do accomplish two important things. First, they point to a fundamental US misunderstanding of the role nuclear weapons now play for the regime. Sans such understanding, US policy toward the regime is likely to remain disjointed, addressing only outward manifestations of its behavior. Second, over the past few decades, US policy toward North Korea has settled around a set of *idée fixe* that either has little basis in fact or potentially runs counter to the self-interests of other nations. This essay expands

on these two points in an effort to offer a new paradigm through which North Korea's nuclear weapons program can be considered and the regime potentially engaged.

Deconstructing Policy *Idée Fixes*

In order to build a new paradigm, we must first identify and dispel the most prevalent truisms that have emerged in US foreign policy attendant to North Korea.

Truism #1: War on the peninsula may be unavoidable. This is more of a recent concern, given the heated rhetoric between the two leaders. The likelihood of war being intentionally waged on the Korean peninsula, however, remains unlikely (but not nonexistent) for legal, security, and humanitarian reasons: (1) initiating an attack would run counter to the regime's primary objective of ensuring its own survival; (2) an attack initiated by the US, under the mutual defense treaty between the US and South Korea (October 1, 1953), would violate treaty terms; (3) South Korean President Moon Jae-in's North Korea policy aligns more closely with the Sunshine Policy pursued by some past leaders rather than the antithetical hard-line policies of others; and (4) a scenario under which the US and South Korea initiated such an action would unleash a humanitarian crisis of epic

proportions. The Seoul Capital Area, home to about half the nation's population, or about 26 million people,⁴ is the primary target for thousands of North Korea's field artillery pieces—the carnage and destruction wrought under such a scenario would be incalculable.

Truism #2: North Korea's nuclear weapons can reach the US mainland. At this point, such assertions are unfounded. The regime's nuclear weapons program has undergone surprisingly rapid advances under Kim Jong-un's stewardship, but at present, threat of a North Korean missile reaching the US mainland remains a hypothetical capability and regime propaganda. While the US media widely reported at the end of November 2017 that the regime had achieved such a capability, based largely on US Secretary of Defense James Mattis's assessment that "North Korea had the ability to hit everywhere in the world,"⁵ it was only two weeks later that the Secretary walked back his own statements, pointing out that "[North Korea] has not yet shown to be a capable threat against us right now."⁶ Not in dispute, however, is that the regime continues to further its nuclear capabilities and at some point in the future will likely become an existential threat to the US.

Truism #3: The US "will never accept a nuclear North Korea," said US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley.⁷ The fact of the matter is, however, that North Korea is already a nuclear state. It is presently augmenting and refining its capability, but the regime long ago crossed the nuclear Rubicon. The real question is what level of perceived vulnerability is the US prepared to accept? Please refer to Truism #1.

The regime considers nuclear weapons its lifeblood for survival and a hedge against more powerful nations for three important reasons: (1) comparatively speaking, they are less costly to maintain than an active military of over one million; (2) they, and accompanying brinkmanship tactics, garner the world's attention, something all three North Korean dynastic leaders have sought; and (3) threats of nuclear weapons development have proven effective as bargaining chips over the decades.

Juche: The Centrality of North Korean Existence

To understand North Korean thinking, one must understand the concept of *Juche* and what it means to many North Koreans. *Juche* is often described as a form of "self-reliance," which while partially true, is also an unfortunate oversimplification. *Juche* is the essence of North Korean existence, steeled in Cold War ideology, and is to most North Koreans what independence, liberty, and justice are to Americans—a cultural bedrock. The following is a definition that helps capture *Juche*'s pervasiveness:

An autonomous self-identity, which has an enabling independence of action that in its

ideal state renders North Korea insusceptible to, or at the very least mitigates, the undesirable external influences of larger powers, particularly the United States, and to a lesser degree the PRC.⁸

In toto, *Juche* is both a domestic tool for political control and the regime's chief foreign policy tool—nuclear weapons are merely the implementation of that policy. Despite its Cold War origins, *Juche* remains essential to better understanding the regime's mindset and is based on four fundamental determinants: independence of action, pragmatism, flexibility, and equality.

Independence of action: Historically, North Korean leaders have sought to maintain operational, ideological, and strategic distance from the influence of larger powers in order to maintain the country's own freedom to act, while simultaneously relying on their support. Kim Il-sung, the country's first leader, relied on his larger communist benefactors, China and the former Soviet Union, for military and other types of aid while keeping their brands of communism at arm's length—Kim worked to develop his own type of communism unique to North Korea—*Kim Il-sungism*.

This almost-reflexive need to maintain independence of action, even in the face of staunch opposition, remains ensconced in regime thinking, manifested in its dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons despite confronting global condemnation.

Flexibility and pragmatism: These determinants are complementary and, by their nature, transactional. During the Cold War, Kim Il-sung found it alternately expedient to align himself with either the former Soviet Union or China, despite the deep ideological rift that existed between the two communist giants—the needs of North Korea were central to Kim, and he was prepared to engage either of the two communist rivals at varying times during the last half of the twentieth century. Similar behavior can be observed today in the regime's willingness to accept food aid from South Korea, its peninsular rival; the United Nations's World Food Program; or other donor nations on the one hand, while maintaining independence of action on the other, i.e., pursuing a nuclear weapons program unabatedly. Regime overtures to participate in the 2018 Winter Olympic Games alongside South Korea are similarly transactional; both countries marched under one flag during the opening ceremonies and fielded a joint women's ice hockey team. The two countries have, however, also marched together during the 2000 and 2004 Olympic Games, but such overtures have accomplished little in the way of mitigating the trajectory of the regime's behavior toward nuclear weapons.⁹

Equality: At the heart of this determinant lies an effort to keep at bay the perceived deleterious impact of "big power chauvinism."¹⁰ Historical-

ly, Kim Il-sung sought to minimize meddling from his two communist benefactors in North Korea's domestic affairs. Consequently, attaining equal footing vis-à-vis the former Soviet Union and China became of tantamount importance in order to strengthen his bargaining position with them. Equality has remained a fundamental pursuit among all three North Korean dynastic leaders—Kim Jong-il's battleground for equality was waged in large measure via the Six-Party talks, and presently, Kim Jong-un pursues the same through a ramped-up nuclear program and the tit-for-tat dialogue with the Donald Trump administration.

Another prevalent *idée fixe* related to North Korea is that its unpredictability makes it nearly impossible to understand. The regime is *not* "unknowable." Dealing with it, however, provides vast opportunity for misunderstanding and miscalculation. But a centuries-old tenet of foreign policy and attendant negotiations is to first know your adversary; historical examples abound on both sides of this immutable truth—those who abided by its wisdom and were successful and those who did not. In the case of North Korea, two additional immutable truths have emerged: (1) another war on the Korean peninsula is not an option; and (2) the current US policy of "nuclear nonacceptability" is outdated. The issue that remains to be resolved is how best to reengage the regime in order to mitigate the effects of its nuclear program. ■

NOTES

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9. Choe Sang-hun. "North and South Korean Teams to March as One," *The New York Times*, January 17, 2018, <https://tinyurl.com/y6uykbt6>.
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