

North Korea's Nuclear Challenge

By Zhiqun Zhu



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North Korea, officially Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), is a family dynasty. The current leader, Kim Jong-un, who succeeded his father, Kim Jong-il, in 2011, is only the third leader of the country since its founding in 1948 by Kim Il-sung. The division of the Korean peninsula into two separate countries in 1948 was perpetuated by the 1950–1953 Korean War. The two Koreas took different paths, and today, South Korea, officially the Republic of Korea (ROK), is one of the most dynamic and prosperous economies in the world, while North Korea remains one of the world's poorest and most closed societies. Despite hostilities and vast gaps between the two, both still harbor the dream of reunifying the peninsula into one Korean nation.

However, before they sit down to map out their common future, the two Koreas must overcome some tremendous obstacles, the most difficult of which is North Korea's nuclear program.

North Korea's nuclear program can be traced back to the Korean War. The North started the war on June 25th, 1950 by attacking the South in an effort to forcefully unify the nation. After United Nations and Chinese interventions, the war reached a stalemate, and the two fighting sides signed an armistice on July 27th, 1953. Technically, the war has not officially ended, since no peace treaty has been signed. In this context, North Korea began to flirt with the idea of developing nuclear weapons in order to counter nuclear-armed United States and South Korea. In the early 1960s, North Korea reportedly requested help from the Soviet Union and China to start the nuclear program but was rejected. However, Soviet engineers helped in constructing the Yongbyon Nuclear Scientific Research Center, which became operational in 1965. North Korea began to develop nuclear weapons in the 1980s.

During Kim Jong-il's rule (1994–2011), North Korea followed the *songun* (military-first) policy, with increased resources devoted to nu-

clear programs. The United States confronted North Korea in the early 1990s, and through strenuous efforts, the two countries reached a denuclearization agreement. According to the 1994 Agreed Framework, North Korea would terminate its nuclear program and the United States would provide two light-water nuclear reactors to North Korea. Both sides broke the deal: North Korea maintained the nuclear program clandestinely, and US Congress did not allocate the budget for building the two reactors.

Between 2003 and 2009, China hosted several rounds of the Six-Party talks involving the United States, China, North Korea, South Korea, Russia, and Japan in the multilateral denuclearization efforts. Unfortunately, the Six-Party talks failed to make substantive progress. After Kim Jong-un came to office, North Korea expedited its nuclear program. As of early 2018, North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests and dozens of missile tests. Notably, in September 2017, North Korea detonated a hydrogen bomb that could be loaded onto an intercontinental ballistic missile capable of reaching the US mainland. In the amended constitution of 2012, North Korea proclaimed itself a nuclear state.

Kim Jong-un's *byungjin* policy—parallel development of economy and military—apparently worked. Despite severe UN sanctions, North Korea has not only survived but experienced moderate growth in the past few years. The large-scale famine that plagued the nation in the 1990s is a thing of the past. North Korea has also set up over a dozen economic development zones, including one in P'yongyang that was established at the end of 2017.

The nuclear program serves multiple purposes for North Korea. It is a deterrent to external threat; it helps regime survival. It is also a bargaining chip North Korea uses to squeeze economic and diplomatic concessions from the international community. Domestically, the nuclear program helps boost nationalism and loyalty. Official propaganda continues to por-

tray the United States as an imperialist power bent on destroying North Korea. Routine joint US–ROK military exercises near North Korea serve as a reminder to the North Korean people that they live under constant menace, and only a nuclear-armed North Korea led by Marshal Kim Jong-un can defend the nation from aggression.

Other countries see North Korea's nuclear program as a serious challenge to regional and international security. Both the United States and China also worry about nuclear proliferation in East Asia.

The relationship between China and North Korea was dubbed as close as “lips and teeth,” but today, they are hardly comrades in arms any more. Chinese leader Xi Jinping just met with Kim Jong-un for the first time in March 2018 in Beijing. Interactions between the two countries at other levels have also significantly decreased. For example, Air China, the only international airline that flies between North Korea and the outside world, suspended its regular flights between Beijing and P'yongyang in November 2017.

The deteriorating China–North Korea relationship indicates that China's clout over North Korea may have been overrated. China is often depicted as a country holding the key to the North Korea problem. Many suggest if China completely cut off trade with North Korea, the P'yongyang regime may collapse within months. China is unprepared to abandon North Korea, not because it still considers the P'yongyang regime as an ally, but because it is afraid of the consequences of a failed North Korea. North Korean refugees, for example, will inundate China's northeast region, creating social, economic, political, and security challenges in China's border areas. The United States and China may have a common interest in denuclearizing North Korea, but they have different visions for the future, particularly regarding the US troops in Asia. Until now, the United States and China have not seriously discussed the road map for a post-Kim Korean peninsula. Distrust between the United States and China has prevented them from fully cooperating on the issue.

Security on the Korean peninsula has entered a vicious cycle. North Korea feels insecure and is determined to improve nuclear weapons. In response, the UN imposes sanctions, and the US and ROK joint military exercises keep the pressure and deterrence on, which in turn causes North Korea to feel even more insecure.

For a long time, the United States has insisted that North Korea give up its nuclear program before the two sides can talk. Former Secretary

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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