

Breaking the Impasse with North Korea

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RECENT TENSIONS WITH North Korea remind us that the nuclear issue will continue to impede regional stability until we reach a lasting resolution. It is easy to adopt a defeatist view of the matter. Certainly the efforts of the international community to convince North Korea to forsake nuclear weapons have met with little success over the past several decades, as a string of once-promising efforts—from the Agreed Framework and the establishment of the Korean Peninsula Economic Development Organization (KEDO) to the Six-Party Talks—have failed. And yet, we must not fall into the trap of believing that a negotiated settlement with North Korea on denuclearization is impossible.

Indeed, the alternatives to a negotiated settlement are too risky to condone. Accepting North Korea as a nuclear power would only make matters worse. It would undermine the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT)—perhaps fatally—and could drive other Asian nations to seek nuclear capabilities as well, especially if they doubt the credibility of the US nuclear umbrella. A fully nuclear North Korea may also be emboldened if it believes that it will not be punished for acts of aggression. The killing of Kim Jong-un's half-brother, using the lethal VX nerve agent in a Kuala Lumpur airport in February 2017, provides a taste of what might be

to come. There are also concerns regarding North Korea's history of proliferation and the slim but real possibility that Kim Jong-un might actually use nuclear weapons in a crisis scenario. As long as the North Korean nuclear question remains unresolved, the risk of a miscalculation leading to conflict will hang over the region.

A preemptive strike has been raised as an option to take out North Korea's nuclear capabilities, including underground facilities, but that is an unreliable strategy and would risk triggering a devastating war. Similarly, attempting to force a collapse of the Kim Jong-un regime would undoubtedly incur a high and bloody toll.

Given the risks, a comprehensive resolution—something along the lines of the September 2005 agreement produced by the Six-Party Talks—still remains the best path forward to resolve the issue. But before we can enter into credible negotiations with North Korea, we must lay the groundwork, intensifying international cooperation and coordination both at the trilateral level—between the United States, South Korea, and Japan—and with China. Together, we must produce a convincing combination of sticks and carrots that convey to North Korea a clear message: that it cannot survive with its nuclear weapons, but that without them, it can.

New Leaders

The latest round of tensions with North Korea has come as new leaders have taken office in the United States and South Korea. Not long after Donald Trump was inaugurated, he sent his newly appointed secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, to South Korea. Tillerson announced the end of the Obama-era approach of “strategic patience,” declared that all options were on the table in order to denuclearize North Korea, and refused to rule out preemptive strikes. North Korea predictably reacted to this tough talk with propaganda and defiance.

Trump’s approach toward North Korea likely stems from two factors. First, Trump has sought to distinguish his administration’s foreign policy through tough talk and an emphasis on an “America First” approach. He has criticized the Obama administration for drawing red lines and then failing to act after they were crossed, such as in Syria on the question of chemical weapons. The recent cruise missile bombing of a Syrian airbase, the (belated) dispatch of the USS *Carl Vinson* Carrier Strike Group to the Korean peninsula, and rhetoric surrounding joint US-ROK military exercises appear to be intended by Trump as demonstrations of US strength and resolve.

Second, North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile development programs have progressed to an advanced stage. North Korea has perfected its short- and medium-range missile capabilities, giving it the ability to strike Japan and South Korea. It has also intensified its long-range missile testing and is coming close to attaining the capability to strike the continental United States and miniaturize nuclear warheads, possibly even within the next two years. This acceleration of North Korea’s program appears to have pushed the Trump administration to go beyond its war of words with the hermit state and explore proactive options as well.

At the same time, the impeachment of South Korean President Park Geun-hye in December 2016 left a leadership void in that country during Trump’s first few months in office. Park was replaced by Moon Jae-in in early May, but his election sparked new concerns that South Korea may adopt a softer foreign policy posture vis-à-vis North Korea, which could in turn trigger a rift in US-ROK relations. Moon was the chief of staff for former President Roh Moo-hyun, a staunch proponent of the Sunshine Policy. And while on the campaign trail, Moon called for a review of the THAAD deployment and also advocated for

the reopening of the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a joint economic zone in the North that permitted South Korean companies to operate by hiring North Korean labor.

The concerns over Moon, however, appear to be somewhat exaggerated. The situation in North Korea has dramatically changed since the era of the Sunshine Policy (1998–2008). North Korea has tested its nuclear weapons five times since 2006, and three of those tests were carried out after Kim Jong-un took the country’s helm in December 2011. Thus a return to a bona fide Sunshine Policy seems unlikely. Moreover, Moon has been quick to emphasize the importance of the US-ROK alliance as the foundation of South Korea’s diplomacy and national security.

Unfortunately, Trump and Moon do not have the luxury of gradually settling into their new posts before tackling this issue. The closer North Korea gets to full-fledged nuclear status, the more difficult negotiations become. Therefore, the challenge for Trump, Moon, and the other former participant nations of the Six-Party Talks will be to work together quickly to establish a foundation for credible negotiations with North Korea that can lead to a diplomatic solution.

Moving Past Self-Defeating Logic

The primary objective of North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile development programs is to acquire a deterrence capability vis-à-vis the United States and South Korea. Given the overwhelming asymmetry of conventional military capabilities in favor of the United States and its Asia-Pacific allies and partners, North Korea perceives nuclear weapons as the only way to guarantee its survival. As such, the current conventional wisdom among most North Korea experts is that, as long as the country is ruled by the Kim family, it will never give up its nuclear weapons, especially now that they are so close to a nuclear intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capability. This defeatist conclusion, however, risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The only way to prevent this from occurring is for the international community to lay out a simple

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calculus for North Korea in no uncertain terms: if it maintains its nuclear weapons it will not be allowed to survive, but without them, it will. This approach requires some key ingredients that have been missing from past initiatives: cooperation with China to effectively pressure North Korea; a strong assurance to North Korea that it will survive denuclearization both as a nation and an economy; and strong contingency planning. While the continued existence of North Korea—even a denuclearized North Korea—may seem politically unpalatable, it is the “lesser evil” among the available options, and is preferable to the cementing of North Korea’s nuclear status or the violent devastation that would surely accompany regime change and collapse scenarios.

Wielding a Bigger Stick

The application of economic sanctions has made North Korea one of the most isolated countries in the world. After each of its nuclear tests, the UN Security Council has responded with renewed resolutions while other countries have imposed unilateral sanctions on top of this. Unfortunately, North Korea has demonstrated its unyielding resolve and an uncanny ability to find ways to evade the current sanctions regime. So what can be done to make economic “sticks” work this time?

It has been fashionable to blame China for failing to support and implement tough sanctions in the UN Security Council. However, the aim of sanctions

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should be to enable credible negotiations, not to induce regime collapse. China, just like the rest of the international community, is frustrated with North Korea’s development of a nuclear weapons program. A nuclear North Korea undermines its

own privileged position as a recognized nuclear power under the NPT. The current regional instability also risks undermining the stable economic growth that the Chinese Communist Party needs to maintain its domestic political legitimacy as it heads toward the 19th National Party Congress this autumn.

While China has backed some tougher sanctions, including a recent curbing of coal imports from North Korea, it has been hesitant to apply the type of crippling pressure that is needed. This hesitancy stems from its own legitimate concerns. First, China

fears an inflow of North Korean refugees. This fear is magnified given that 40 percent of the residents of the Yanbian Korean Autonomous Prefecture, which straddles China’s border with North Korea, are ethnic Koreans. Second, China worries that regime collapse would result in a unified Korea that would align with the United States and Japan, removing its buffer zone and raising the possibility of US military troops stationed along the Chinese border. Third, there is also the risk that a sudden collapse would bring devastation and violent conflict—a scenario that would seriously impact not just China but also South Korea, Japan, and the region more broadly. Additionally, there is the risk in a collapse scenario that nuclear weapons and technologies may end up in the hands of other countries or even terrorists.

In order to create conditions that would let China join in applying more substantial and effective sanctions on North Korea—such as cutting off hard currency and energy supplies (especially oil)—the United States, South Korea, and Japan must work together to reassure China. This reassurance should be founded on a common recognition that the North Korean threat has evolved to a new stage. It should involve discussions to work out a mutually acceptable agreement on buffer zones—for example, an agreement that the United States would not station military troops above the 38th parallel in a unified Korea—in exchange for Chinese cooperation on hard currency and energy sanctions. And at the same time, China will also need to be part of concrete contingency planning discussions in order to prepare for a worst-case scenario on the peninsula, including the question of how to deal with refugee flows. With such diplomatic reassurances, it should be possible to shift China’s strategic calculus to the point where it no longer sees tough currency and energy sanctions as riskier than the maintenance of the current, unstable status quo.

Offering More Carrots

Once the groundwork has been laid through cooperation with China, the door for credible denuclearization negotiations may open. The objective then must be to demonstrate to North Korea that if it refuses to give up its nuclear program, the sanctions will continue and it will not be able to survive. But at the same time, positive incentives are required as well. Those “carrots” should include diplomatic and economic reassurances regarding North Korea and

the Kim regime's post-denuclearization survival. On the diplomatic front, the current ceasefire under the Korean War armistice agreement should be converted into a permanent peace treaty, the United States and Japan should normalize their diplomatic relations with North Korea, and the Six-Party Talks countries should pledge not to intervene in North Korean domestic politics against the Kim regime. Assurances on economic survival will need to include international economic and energy assistance to North Korea. The framework for this comprehensive resolution has already been agreed upon under the terms of the September 2005 agreement in the Six-Party Talks. But only through the use of enhanced sticks and carrots can the international community realistically bring North Korea back to the table and move forward to implement this agreement.

Expanding Contingency Planning

The use of harsher sanctions to demonstrate to North Korea that it cannot survive if it maintains its nuclear weapons is an inherently risky strategy. Those risks are outweighed by the prospect of a full-fledged nuclear North Korea, but we must prepare for the possibility that North Korea may react aggressively to hard-hitting sanctions or that the regime might miscalculate how far it can push back until a collapse scenario is triggered. Multilateral contingency planning to prepare for a worst-case scenario on the peninsula must be bolstered and expanded.

Stronger contingency planning should start with increased US-ROK-Japan trilateral cooperation. There has been some progress on this front. The passage of security-related bills by the Abe government in Japan in September 2015 expanded and clarified the nature of the logistical and rear-area assistance

that the Japan Self-Defense Forces can provide to the United States in a crisis scenario. Also, the signing of a GSOMIA (General Security of Military Information Agreement) between South Korea and Japan in November 2016 enables the sharing of sensitive intelligence related to North Korea.

But contingency planning must move beyond the trilateral realm and also be coordinated with China. This is necessary not only to reassure China and enable it to join in applying more effective sanctions, as mentioned above. It is also critical in order to ensure that North Korea's nuclear weapons can be secured as quickly and efficiently as possible in a collapse scenario to prevent them from falling into the wrong hands. Such contingency planning also has the added value of demonstrating to North Korea the seriousness of the international community's resolve that it must denuclearize.



The intensification of North Korea's nuclear and missile development requires a rapid response if we are to avoid cementing North Korea's status as a full-fledged nuclear power. The international community must act decisively to lay the groundwork for credible negotiations with North Korea. Given the risks that preemptive strikes, regime change, and collapse scenarios would entail—namely, massive bloodshed and instability in the region as a whole—denuclearization through a negotiated settlement is the only option. Without a resolution, a cloud of instability will continue to hang over the region indefinitely. The time to act is now, before North Korea perfects its missile technology and nuclear warhead miniaturization capabilities, or else the chance may be lost.