



Dealing with the DPRK Nuclear Challenge: Exploring the Options

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Summary

Washington holds that “all options are on the table” in dealing with North Korea’s nuclear and missile challenge. While there are dozens of variations on the theme, there are really only four categories of options in dealing with Pyongyang. The two extremes – regime acceptance and regime removal – need to be set aside, at least for the time being. This leaves regime transformation – “bringing Kim Jong-un to his senses, not to his knees” as one American admiral put it – or regime destabilization through non-military means. Washington, through at least four previous administrations, has been trying to transform the regime. But neither the incentives nor the consequences have thus far been sufficient to persuade Pyongyang to give up its nuclear ambitions. UN Security Council Resolution 2371 represents the first real attempt to make the consequences severe enough to bring the North back to the negotiating table, where it’s been suggested that economic incentives will be provided if denuclearization proceeds. But it remains to be seen if they, unlike previous iterations, will be vigorously enforced by all parties. If not, regime destabilization or regime change via non-military means may become the least worst option short of acquiescence or war.

1. When it comes to dealing with the nuclear weapons challenge from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea), a number of different US official spokespersons have said that “all options are on the table.” Except, of course, for those options that have seemingly already been removed by different (and in some instances, the same) spokespersons. To say that the Trump administration is sending mixed signals when it comes to dealing with Pyongyang is indeed an understatement. The most inflammatory signals, unfortunately, are coming from President Donald Trump himself, witness his recent “fire and fury” comments.¹ This was initially threatened in response to North Korean threats – a red line quickly crossed by Pyongyang – and then amended to being the response to attacks against the US and its allies, bringing him back in line with the long-stated US position.

2. Of course, we were forewarned; during his campaign, candidate Trump argued that “we must as a nation be more unpredictable” when it comes to foreign policy.² This is one promise

¹ “Donald Trump threatens ‘fury’ against N Korea,” *BBC News*, 8 August 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-40869319>

² “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech,” *New York Times*, 27 April 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html>

he has certainly kept. While this may keep potential enemies off-balance, it can have a more troubling impact on one's friends and allies, not to mention other members of the administration, who are often not informed in advance of tweets and other quasi-policy pronouncements.³

3. To his credit, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has tried to define Washington's North Korea policy:

We initiated a sustained and continued intensified campaign on what I like to call peaceful pressure, because the options available to us, I think as all of you well understand, are limited So we felt the appropriate thing to do first was to seek peaceful pressure on the regime in North Korea to have them develop a willingness to sit and talk with us and others but with an understanding that a condition of those talks is there is no future where North Korea holds nuclear weapons or the ability to deliver those nuclear weapons to anyone in the region much less to the homeland.⁴

4. Tillerson, at his 1 August State Department press briefing, then continued:

We don't think having a dialogue where the North Koreans come to the table assuming they're going to maintain their nuclear weapons is productive. So that's really what the objective that we are about is.

We have reaffirmed our position towards North Korea, that what we are doing, we do not seek a regime change; we do not seek the collapse of the regime; we do not seek an accelerated reunification of the peninsula; we do not seek an excuse to send our military north of the 38th parallel. And we're trying to convey to the North Koreans we are not your enemy, we are not your threat, but you are presenting an unacceptable threat to us, and we have to respond. And we hope that at some point, they will begin to understand that and that we would like to sit and have a dialogue

with them about the future that will give them the security they seek and the future economic prosperity for North Korea, but that will then promote economic prosperity throughout Northeast Asia.

This is going to be a continued effort to put ever greater pressure on the North Korean regime because our other options, obviously, are not particularly attractive.⁵

5. Other members of the administration, not to mention the president himself, have been less clear or have sent potentially contradictory messages. Some have talked about "preventive" or "preemptive" attacks; others have implied that "regime change" may indeed still be an option, Tillerson's assurances notwithstanding. Still others have called for diplomacy under the right circumstances or at the right time (usually not further defined) while those outside the administration keep shouting about various "freeze" proposals (also usually not well defined). One thing seems clear and consistent, however. The Trump administration presently sees little point in sitting down to dialogue with the DPRK unless and until it is willing to put its nuclear weapons on the table. Getting to that point remains the challenge.

6. This article will attempt to look at a wide range of options available to Washington as it grapples with the DPRK nuclear challenge, including the "not particularly attractive" ones, while discussing pros and cons of each. I would arbitrarily break the options down into four main categories (which admittedly can overlap) for ease of discussion: regime acceptance, regime transformation, regime destabilization/change, and regime removal/reunification. While the final decision will be Washington's to make, it must be understood that no option is likely to work unless Washington and Seoul are in lock-step and others like China and Russia are, if not enthusiastically supportive, at least not working to undermine the effort. Japanese support is also crucial but much easier to assume.

³ I say "quasi" since it is still not clear, six-plus months into this administration how seriously – or not at all – one should take tweets and other off-the-cuff or unscripted remarks made by the commander-in-chief.

⁴ Rex W. Tillerson, "Remarks at a Press Availability," Washington DC, 1 August 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2017/08/272979.htm>

⁵ Tillerson, "Remarks at a Press Availability," Washington DC, 1 August 2017.

Regime Acceptance

Do It Their Way

7. The one sure way to get Pyongyang to agree with you is to give Kim Jong-un exactly what he wants. Pyongyang, under its *byungjin* or “simultaneous pursuit” policy, has proclaimed the dual goals of economic development and nuclear weapons. The US – indeed the international community, including the DPRK’s primary benefactor, China – has said the North can’t have both. UN Security Council sanctions aim, in part, at leading Pyongyang to make the right choice.

8. The North has made it clear, however, that it will not even begin to discuss denuclearization until and unless Washington agrees to a bilateral peace treaty, which DPRK interlocutors insist must include an end to the US–ROK (Republic of Korea or South Korea) alliance and a withdrawal of US forces from, and its nuclear umbrella over, the Korean Peninsula. Washington has steadfastly (and in my view rightly) refused this condition, insisting that normalization of relations and Pyongyang’s acceptance into the community of nations requires denuclearization. Nonetheless, in discussing options, it is useful to remind ourselves what the other party wants.

9. In my view, no US administration could or should enter into bilateral peace accord negotiations with Pyongyang that cut Seoul out of the discussion. Washington must also recognize that normalizing relations with a still nuclear weapons-equipped DPRK would in all probability sound a death knell for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and cause other dominos to fall: ROK, Japan, Taiwan, etc. US (or ROK) normalization of relations with a nuclear-weapons equipped DPRK should be one option that remains off the table.

Acceptance Plus Enhanced Deterrence/Defence

10. There are a number of other options short of normalization that *de facto* accept Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons status and then focus on deterrence (which has worked for 60-plus years) and containment. Some even include a

bilateral peace treaty prior to denuclearization. While such proposals may be (slightly) better than an all-out war and the devastation that would cause, these are last-ditch options that should be strongly resisted. Anyone who believes a nuclear-weapons equipped DPRK will become less antagonistic needs to go back and study its history.

11. Meanwhile, in the area of proliferation, even *de facto* recognition could cause more problems than it potentially solves. Public opinion in Seoul already runs strongly in favour of the ROK having its own independent nuclear weapons capability. Any US action that *de facto* accepts or validates Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons status seems sure to drive Seoul to follow suit.

Creation of a North–South Federation or Confederation

12. Another approach that accepts the North Korea regime for what it is, at least temporarily, is to encourage Seoul and Pyongyang to take the first step by substituting the current hostile policies towards one another with one focused on peaceful coexistence. Former ROK President Kim Dae-Jung and DPRK Founder Kim Il-Song previously suggested such an approach. A willingness by each side to accept the other’s existence and to agree to respect the other’s right to exist would create a positive atmosphere that would make all other things possible.

13. The odds of this are rather slim, but it is worth considering and encouraging. It does not directly address the nuclear issue but could set the stage for more meaningful discussions or pursuit of one of the other options. Under such circumstances, a strong US presence and alliance remains essential.

Regime Transformation

14. While the phrase is seldom used, most policy approaches today, by the US, UN and others, are aimed at regime transformation. As the leader of the US Pacific Command, Admiral Harry Harris testified before Congress in late April, the US objective remains to “bring Kim

Jong-un to his senses, not to his knees.”⁶ While bringing Kim to his senses without first bringing him to his knees has remained a challenge, there are a number of options aimed at getting the North to put its nuclear weapons on the table.

Leap Day Two Freeze for Aid

15. At times, DPRK interlocutors have hinted that Pyongyang would be willing to return to a “freeze for humanitarian assistance” agreement along the lines of the ill-fated Leap Day Agreement, announced on 29 February 2012 and undermined 16 days later when the North announced its intention to launch a satellite (which everyone but Pyongyang understood to be a violation of UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting ballistic missile activity). True, a new agreement (like the original one) will not solve the problem; nonetheless, it potentially keeps things from getting worse.

16. We should have no illusions, however. The only verifiable freeze would be a halt to missile and nuclear tests, which are easily detected, and perhaps a freeze of reprocessing and enrichment at Yongbyon (halting the known plutonium and highly enriched uranium production efforts), which can be monitored. Most analysts believe there are uranium enrichment sites outside Yongbyon which would not be affected and scientific research and laboratory work would continue virtually unimpeded.

Freeze for Freeze (Beijing’s Preferred Next Step)

17. The Chinese, among others, have been promoting a “freeze for freeze” option where North Korea would suspend nuclear and missile test activities in return for a freeze or reduction in the scope and nature of joint US/ROK military exercises. Washington has rejected this idea, in part over concerns for its impact on military preparedness. Of greater concern is the lack of clarity in what exactly

will be frozen. While many talk about freezing *programs*, it is doubtful Pyongyang would agree to anything more than a freeze in *testing*. Even here, North Korean interlocutors have told me that any freeze in testing would not apply to satellite launches (also banned under Security Council resolutions). This is what caused the original Leap Day Agreement to quickly crumble.

18. One can argue that, its obvious faults aside, a new freeze is better than where we are today, is most likely to be supported by Beijing, and could lead to deeper cooperation. True, but only if it is seen as the first step towards a genuine process of denuclearization which at some point must include intrusive verification measures. Otherwise, a freeze plays right into Pyongyang’s hands. It rewards the North, not for good behaviour (verifiable steps towards disarmament) but merely for the absence of bad behaviour (banned testing). It might provide a sense of progress without any real progress towards the ultimate denuclearization goal. It allows Pyongyang to sequentially have both its nuclear program and economic development.

Simultaneous Dialogues on Step-by-Step Normalization and Denuclearization

19. Another approach involves simultaneous dialogue efforts aimed at both denuclearization and normalization, with the US taking the lead on the denuclearization front while Seoul takes the lead on peace treaty discussions. This could take place within the context of the currently moribund Six-Party Talks, which had a number of simultaneous working groups, or could proceed along parallel bilateral tracks. A “freeze for humanitarian assistance” could be the first step for either or both efforts.

20. Pyongyang has been reluctant to discuss a peace treaty with Seoul but without direct North–South rapprochement, it seems impossible to achieve a normalization of relations with Washington, which realistically speaking can only come after denuclearization. This approach would immediately test Pyongyang’s sincerity and its willingness, finally, to treat the Seoul government as a sovereign equal and would partially satisfy ROK President Moon

⁶ “Statement of Admiral Harry B. Harris Jr., U.S. Navy Commander, U.S. Pacific Command Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on U.S. Pacific Command Posture, 27 April 2017,” https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Harris_04-27-17.pdf

Jae-in's desire for Seoul to play a lead role in Korean Peninsula negotiations.

Keep up Sanctions and Hope for the Best

21. This "strategic patience" approach, in one form or another, is what the US has been doing since Six-Party Talks broke down in the closing months of the George W. Bush administration. It hasn't worked, primarily because sanctions have not been consistently and rigorously enforced.

Tighten Sanctions to Bring DPRK Economy to Brink of Collapse

22. This is a "much, much more of the same" approach but with a greater sense of urgency and comprehensiveness. It is the logical extension of the Obama administration's policy. Security Council Resolutions 2321 (S/RES/2321, 30 November 2016) and (especially) 2371 (S/RES/2371, 5 August 2017) are clear steps in this direction, if they are vigorously enforced. Put bluntly, this significantly enhanced sanctions approach assumes that the only way to truly "bring him to his senses" is to bring Kim Jong-un to his knees. Many have argued that there are much stronger economic, political and diplomatic steps that the US, ROK and Japan can take unilaterally, and that the UN Security Council could pursue multilaterally, that could tighten the screws on the North's economy and force it to choose between continuing to develop nuclear weapons or face economic collapse. Resolution 2371's restrictions on North Korea's earnings is a giant step in this direction.

23. Unfortunately, as long as Pyongyang is convinced that Beijing will not turn off its life support, it is hard to have much confidence in this approach. Fortunately, the reverse is also true, but one wonders what Pyongyang has to do to finally convince Beijing that enough is enough. The North Koreans seem to believe that China needs them more than they need China. Unfortunately, Chinese actions reinforce this belief. An all-out sanctions approach could work, even without genuine Chinese participation and support, but it would be harder and take a lot longer.

Vasey Approach, Option One

24. Let me put in a plug at this point for a suggestion put forth by the Pacific Forum's founder, Rear Admiral Joe Vasey (USN, ret'd), now 100 years old but still thinking strategically. He proposes a grand bargain with Pyongyang where the US would offer a mini-Marshall Plan and security assurances (hopefully backed by China and Russia) in return for verifiable complete denuclearization. It would begin with a special emissary's visit to Pyongyang explaining that there are only two options left and this is its best and final choice.

Regime Change

Vasey Approach, Option Two

25. The emissary would also make clear that a refusal to accept this proposal would compel the US to take a second path, one aimed at regime destabilization and/or collapse. If the current regime refuses to accept Washington's "grand bargain," then the US is left with only two realistic alternatives: accept the DPRK as a nuclear-armed state or bring about the regime's collapse in hopes that a successor government will be more amenable. This alternative begins with propaganda broadcasts aimed at the North Korean people and other ruling elite explaining what kind of an opportunity their leader has just rejected in return for future suffering and sacrifice.

Regime Change by Other than Overt Military Means

26. Regrettably, the time is rapidly approaching (if not already here) when a policy of actively pursuing and promoting regime change needs to be clearly put on the table. All too often, regime change is equated to military action but there are a number of overt and covert steps that can be taken to destabilize and ultimately replace the Kim Jong-un regime with one more willing to trade its nuclear capability for economic development and international recognition. Traditionally, members of North Korea's elite rallied around the ruling family since this was the best guarantee of their own survival and success.

27. As more senior officials face the firing squad, however – and rumour has it that six of the eight pallbearers at his father’s funeral have been purged or put to death – the reverse may become the case. Psychological operations can hasten this view. For its part, Pyongyang has long accused Washington and Seoul of pursuing a regime change policy. Perhaps it is time to show the North what one really looks like. Even if this option is not pursued, openly discussing it will send an important signal to Pyongyang that time may not in fact be on its side.

28. If the US, ROK and others have really concluded that nothing will stop Kim Jong-un from pursuing nuclear weapons and his ability to hold the US mainland at risk is rapidly approaching or is already here, then regime change (by non-military means) may be the only credible alternative either to living with and accepting the DPRK as a nuclear-armed state or going to war.

29. The concern here is not a surprise DPRK nuclear attack on the ROK, the US or Japan. Such an action is the equivalent of instant suicide for the North Korean state. The concern is that Kim Jong-un will think he has Washington deterred and will step up provocative actions that could lead us down a slippery slope. Likewise, in a period of increased tension, if it was determined that the North had a long-range missile potentially equipped with a nuclear warhead on a launch pad, preemption by the US would have to be considered, again with escalatory consequences.

30. For any regime change option to work (or at least to increase the prospects for success), the US and ROK would have to coordinate with Beijing and Moscow and indicate that, if they cooperate, the US/ROK would be open to the survival of the North Korean state, but not the current leadership. While Korean Peninsula reunification under Seoul remains the long-term objective, peaceful coexistence between the ROK and a denuclearized, more cooperative and open DPRK should be an acceptable near-term goal to all concerned.

31. This will also address the Chinese concern about maintaining a North Korean “buffer

zone.” Buffer zones have little real applicability in the age of the Internet and cyber warfare, not to mention long-range strike capabilities. Nonetheless, many Chinese strategists cite the need for a buffer zone in arguing against various collapse scenarios. Maintaining a North Korean state – albeit a kinder, gentler, denuclearized version – should satisfy this perceived need while achieving Beijing’s primary stated goal of “regional stability.” It is becoming increasingly obvious that one cannot have such stability as long as the DPRK clings to, and threatens to use, its nuclear weapons.

32. To be clear, I am not recommending that the Trump administration pursue a regime change option . . . yet. This is a risky strategy that should not be taken lightly. But neither should it be taken off the table. Circumstances may make it the only viable option short of war to ensure future peace and stability. If the North steadfastly refuses to give up its nuclear weapons and continues to demand it be accepted as a nuclear weapon state, its neighbours would be compelled to live with an explosive situation and leader and be subjected to nuclear blackmail or worse. The risks associated with not taking more dramatic steps in dealing with the North may soon exceed the risks of doing nothing and hoping for the best.

Regime Removal/Reunification

Preventive War

33. There have been a number of references in recent weeks to the idea of a “preventive war,” one aimed at removing the North’s nuclear capabilities before it is too late. Some argue that escalation can be controlled, that the North will not respond with an all-out attack on the South in response to US surgical strikes specifically aimed either at the North’s nuclear and missile arsenals (if they can in fact be found) or at national command authorities (that is, Kim Jong-un and his inner circle of military and party leaders), which would likely be the easier of the two target sets.⁷ This is an extremely high risk option.

⁷ See: Uri Friedman, “North Korea: The Military Options,”

The Final Solution

34. Make no mistake, a march on Pyongyang to remove the toxic regime, is well within US/ROK capabilities. It would, however, result in unacceptable levels of collateral damage and should only be contemplated in response to an egregious DPRK military provocation or all-out attack.

Conclusion

35. It has been said that the Korean Peninsula is the “land of lousy options.” I do not disagree. But the North’s determination to develop a long-range nuclear strike capability has made “doing nothing” too dangerous an option to employ. The great irony is that the North appears to believe that the greatest way to ensure regime survival is to follow this path. But the closer it comes to achieving this goal, the more insecure it will become, since the price of doing nothing (that is, tolerating the regime’s existence, as the US and ROK have done for 60-plus years) at some point may exceed the price of removing it. This is why both President Trump and Kim Jong-un should give the Vasey option serious consideration.

The Atlantic, 17 May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/war-north-korea-options/524049/>; and Alex Lockie, “Trump says the military is ‘locked and loaded’ to strike North Korea — Here’s how it would go down,” *Business Insider*, 11 August 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/us-preemptive-strike-north-korea-2017-3/#first-a-decision-would-need-to-be-made-1>

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