

Breaking Deadlock on the Korean Peninsula? Four Perspectives



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Can the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula be resolved and how? What are the strategic interests of the parties and their differences? What steps are needed to prevent tensions from escalating further? In seeking to answer these questions, this paper brings together the views of four senior experts from China, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States to each share their perspectives on the challenges and opportunities ahead.

After the dramatic escalation of tensions on the Korean Peninsula in 2017, the resumption of dialogue between North and South Korea in the lead up to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics has brought hope that it may yield movement in deescalating the situation and enable finding a path back towards the negotiation table for all parties. Fundamental obstacles remain, however, which put in question the sustainability of any thaw in relations, chief of which is the intractability of positions over North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

To encourage debate, and provide an equal platform for all sides, **ISDP invited four experts from China, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States**, respectively, to each share their perspectives on the considerable challenges but also opportunities ahead in breaking the deadlock on the Korean Peninsula.

It should be noted that the authors here write strictly in their personal capacity, and their opinions do not necessarily reflect the views of their governments.

Beyond providing a forum for debate, ISDP takes neither a position on, nor responsibility for, any of the arguments made in this paper.

In the opening piece, **Ryang Tong Il** from the Institute of Disarmament and Peace in North Korea writes that his country's pursuit of a nuclear deterrent is aimed at checking U.S. aggression. Having achieved this objective, he argues that a strategic balance of power has been created on the Korean Peninsula that creates a conducive environment for inter-Korean relations to develop peacefully. Arguing that it is a "pipedream" that North Korea would abandon its nuclear weapons, he further sees the nuclear issue as having "nothing to do with inter-Korean relations." In so doing, he urges South Korea to "squarely see this stark reality" and improve relations without external interference. Accordingly, looking ahead, he argues that the U.S. and South Korea should go beyond postponement to putting an end to what he terms as all-too-dangerous joint military exercises.

In the next contribution, **Joon Hyung Kim** of Handong Global University in South Korea, argues that while North Korea's denuclearization is not likely to be realistic in the short term, it cannot be abandoned as a goal. As such, he argues for greater trilateral cooperation and coordination between the U.S., South Korea, and China. For this to be effective, he argues, there needs to be a division of labor in which the U.S. and China maximize leverage, while South Korea initiates dialogue with North Korea at the same time as it mediates between the U.S. and China. In assessing current U.S. policy, he criticizes the Trump administration for its hardline rhetoric that has personalized tensions between President Trump and Kim Jong Un, as well as exerting pressure on China which he sees as counterproductive if Beijing is to wield its leverage over North Korea.

In his article, **Zhu Feng**, Director of the Institute of International Studies at Nanjing University, China, also calls for greater coordination between the U.S., China, and South Korea as part of a strategy of "shared responsibilities." He argues that North Korea's accelerating nuclear and missile programs have turned it more into a strategic liability than an asset for China. While recognizing that North Korea needs to be provided with security assurances that respect its survival, he asserts that clear implications should be spelt out to Pyongyang in the case of further nuclear or ICBM tests. He further argues, however, that any successful strategy must be "directed not only at denuclearization, but also at the abolition of the Cold War-like hostility on the Korean Peninsula."

Finally, **Abraham Denmark** of the Wilson Center in Washington D.C., warns that the U.S. and North Korea are on a "collision course" as a result of the latter's nuclear and missile programs. He argues that denuclearization is likely to remain the goal of the U.S. in the foreseeable future. In the meantime, in the absence of a resolution, there is a need to avoid conflict and manage tensions. As such, he proposes a diplomatic offensive towards a freeze on North Korea's testing of nuclear devices and ballistic missile tests. Key to this, he argues, would be an "internal American understanding of what combination of concessions it would be willing to put on the table." Another constructive step would be the establishment of military-to-mili-

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tary channels to reduce the dangers of strategic miscalculation and misunderstanding. Notwithstanding, he upholds the view that the U.S. and its allies also need to maintain a credible deterrent to North Korea's threats.

We hope that the reader finds this paper useful to compare and contrast the different positions and perspectives. In so doing, we make no pretense that a solution can be found within them. In fact, if anything, the gap in security perceptions between North Korea and the other authors illustrated here would appear to point to few opportunities for a negotiated resolution, at least in the foreseeable future. But while the authors may differ on much, all are agreed that any escalation of crisis is in no side's interest and that management of the conflict, and its ultimate resolution, can only be found through non-military means. In the shorter term, from ISDP's perspective, this points to the need for increased focus on crisis management and the adoption of confidence- and security-building measures. It is only a de-escalation of military tensions that, in the end, will create a more favorable security environment for dialogue to have a chance to succeed.

A North Korean Perspective

Ryang Tong Il

A pleasant breeze is blowing in favor of détente on the Korean peninsula where until just recently the danger of war loomed. Where then does this gentle wind blow from, and who is the force behind it? The trend of détente that induces our fellow countrymen and the world's people to be swelled in their hearts with joy has come from the courageous decision of Comrade Kim Jong Un, Supreme Leader of the DPRK, who delivered in his New Year's Address the ideas of the sublime love of the nation, and of defending peace.

In his New Year's Address, the dear respected Comrade Kim Jong Un put forward the policy of easing acute military tensions between the north and the south, creating a peaceful environment on the Korean peninsula, and actively creating an environment favorable for national reconciliation and reunification.

The DPRK also expressed its stance that it earnestly wishes for a success of the Winter Olympics to be held in south Korea and that it is willing to dispatch its delegation and adopt other necessary measures from this point of view.

Within only 20 days after the address, the north and the south held high-level talks to discuss the issues of ensuring the success of the Winter Olympics and improving inter-Korean relations. Both sides also agreed to resume the talks between the military authorities and other talks at different levels. The working-level talks on the visit of an art troupe and the participation of a DPRK delegation in the Winter Olympics were also successfully held.

It is the unanimous view at home and abroad that there would be no issues that cannot be resolved when the north and the south sit together and discuss them according to the desire and interests of the nation. Such a development of the situation was unimaginable only a month ago, and it is not something which was gained easily.

Last year, the U.S. continued to play with fire on the Korean peninsula and its surroundings by conducting

the largest-ever joint military exercises with south Korea and deploying three nuclear-powered aircraft carrier strike groups all at the same time. Consequently, the Korean peninsula was exposed to a constant danger of war. The scenarios of “April War” and “August Crisis” are typical examples of such dangers. Under such circumstances, the U.S. president made lunatic remarks such as “total destruction” and “extermination” of the DPRK on the stage of the UN General Assembly last September.

If we had flinched even a little from the high-handed acts of the reckless and ill-reasoned Trump administration, we would have fallen under the indiscriminate military target of the U.S., just like Syria and Afghanistan. That would have led the whole of the Korean peninsula being plunged into a cruel nuclear war – far from holding the Winter Olympics in south Korea this year.

The respected Comrade Kim Jong Un stood firm in overpowering the U.S. military threat with his matchless courage and guts and successfully led the test launch of ICBMs that have placed the whole of the U.S. mainland within a range of strike as well as the test of a super-intense thermonuclear weapon, thus achieving the historic cause of perfecting the national nuclear force. The DPRK has at last come to possess a powerful and reliable war deterrent, which nothing and no force can reverse.

As a result, Trump's “fire and fury” was gone like smoke, war came to be prevented on the Korean peninsula, and it became possible for the north and the south to sit together to hold talks to share the national joy and discuss ways to help each other. Today's reality shows that, as long as a powerful war deterrent is possessed by the DPRK, the north and the south can surely prevent the outbreak of war and ease tension on the Korean peninsula when they are determined to do so.

It is the invariable position of the DPRK to resolve all inter-Korean issues in a peaceful way without recourse to war, and through dialogues and negotiations. The fact that the DPRK consolidated its nuclear deterrent was all aimed at checking the U.S.'s dangerous attempt to inflict a nuclear holocaust on the Korean nation and defend its rights to existence and sovereignty. The

south Korean authorities also claimed at a time of heightening crisis last year that they would never use military force.

In order to avoid the danger of nuclear war, which is forced upon our nation by outside forces, and safeguard peace with the joint efforts of our fellow countrymen, it is important for the authorities from the north and the south to stand on the principle of national independence in fulfilling their responsibility and role.

Some quarters are making nonsensical remarks that the dialogue between the north and the south should be oriented towards “denuclearization,” all of which have come out of the intention to destabilize the strategic balance of power and trigger off a new crisis on the Korean peninsula. As mentioned before, it is a well-known fact that any peaceful activities between the north and the south are now within the range of possibility thanks to the powerful nuclear deterrent possessed by the DPRK.

Given this fact, it is quite illogical that the south Korean authorities cannot afford to improve relations with the same nation with nukes while forging an alliance and maintaining “a strategic partnership” with the outsider with its nukes. The smooth progress of all Winter Olympics related working-level talks between the north and the south lies in the fact that they do not include the nuclear issue, which has nothing to do with inter-Korean relations.

The south Korean authorities should bear in mind that the only way to improve inter-Korean relations and safeguard peace on the Korean peninsula is to squarely see the stark reality created on the Korean peninsula and work together with the same nation. It should also make a bold policy switch towards the spirit of “By Our Nation Itself.”

The U.S. is already in the process of deploying its strategic assets such as nuclear-powered aircraft carrier strike groups towards the Korean peninsula. It has even said that it will lose no time in resuming the joint military exercises when the Winter Olympics are over.

The mere fact that the U.S. and south Korean authorities took the step to postpone the joint military exercises to create a peaceful environment needed for the Winter Olympics is a self-recognition by them that the joint military exercises constitute a major threat to destroying peace and security on the Korean peninsula, and that it is only natural for the DPRK to take self-defensive measures to cope with them.

The international community, in the interest of promoting global peace, is concerned about any prospect of conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Despite this, it is obvious that the recent good mood witnessed in inter-Korean dialogue, which has resumed after a long suspension, would be jeopardized and a vicious cycle of tension and confrontation would return again, if the U.S. and south Korea restart the joint military exercises after the Olympic Games.

The U.S. and the south Korean authorities cite the U.S.-South Korea “Mutual Defense Treaty” (signed in October 1953) in their insistence on the “legal grounds” of the joint military exercises conducted so far. But the adoption of the above “treaty” itself cannot be justified under any circumstances, as it is an illegal document in wanton violation of the Korean Armistice Agreement, which called for holding a Political Conference to withdraw all foreign forces from the whole of the Korean peninsula within three months after the Armistice Agreement’s conclusion.

The risk exists of the situation on the Korean peninsula spiraling out of control with a worst-case situation of fighting and nuclear war occurring if the U.S. and the south Korean authorities go to the length of conducting joint military exercises.

It may be considered for the U.S. that such a development of the situation would conform to its “America First” policy but it would bring a great calamity not only to the north and the south of Korea, but also to their neighbors and the rest of the world. If a military conflict broke out on the Korean peninsula, it will not be confined to the Korean peninsula only, but it will very quickly spread over to the whole of U.S. territory.

Thus the U.S. and the south Korean authorities should put an end to joint military drills rather than postponing them, and refrain from any acts of deploying nuclear armaments and the aggressive forces of the U.S. The U.S. should clearly see that its whole land is within range of our nuclear strike and so give up its pipedream of making the DPRK abandon its nuclear weapons.

By postponing joint military exercises, as unanimously demanded by our nation and the international community, the U.S. temporarily avoided worldwide criticism and condemnation. It should therefore draw the lesson and make a level-headed judgement that peaceful co-existence is the better option for its state interests than provoking tensions.

It is also in the strategic interests of the DPRK's neighbors to support and encourage the atmosphere to improve inter-Korean relations, which has been provided at great pain, and to set a tone for the positive development of the situation on the Korean peninsula, instead of going against the two Koreas.

Countries which have an interest in easing tensions and ensuring peace on the Korean peninsula should remain vigilant against the U.S.'s bid to stage all-too-dangerous joint military exercises. They should also encourage the north and the south to hold a dialogue in a peaceful environment and improve their relations. This is the only way to control the situation in a stable way based on the strategic balance of power created on the Korean peninsula and in northeast Asia.

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A South Korean Perspective

Joon Hyung Kim

During the past few months, a belligerent North Korea has fired missiles, tested a nuclear bomb, and repeatedly threatened war. With the North's fast advancing nuclear weapons capabilities in the hands

of a provocative and inexperienced young leader, most South Koreans are fearful about the possibility of a military conflict. Without question, the South Korean people agree on one thing: there should not be another war on the Korean Peninsula. And high officials in Washington repeatedly confirm that they prefer a diplomatic solution, while mentioning that all options remain on the table. Another problem is President Donald Trump's tumultuous threats of war against North Korea which he views as a tactic that can create additional leverage.

Threatening North Korea with "fire and fury" was just the beginning of his portfolio of hostile words against North Korea. Just weeks after threatening to "totally destroy" North Korea at the UN General Assembly in September, he tweeted again that "only one thing will work" when it comes to dealing with the regime in Pyongyang. Written just days after the U.S. president told reporters and top military aides that they were in "the calm before the storm," the tweet clearly alluded to military action. Trump's hardline rhetoric and belief that dialogue is a waste of time raises the risk of escalation and miscalculations, even as key members of his administration such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have tried to assuage fears among South Koreans by repeating that the U.S. has no interest in regime change.

Equally worrisome is that Kim Jong-un's nuclear and missile programs are not just about gaining leverage, but more about gaining capability. He might be exaggerating his accomplishments to some extent, but it is not empty bravado. Kim Jong-un declared in his 2018 New Year's Day address that North Korea had achieved completion of its nuclear deterrent against the U.S., which was a reiteration of the state media's proclamation following the successful flight-test of the Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on November 29. Kim also added that he had a "nuclear button" physically installed on his desk in his office. North Korea is a de facto nuclear state, even if nobody except for the North Koreans can accept it as stated policy. Despite some lingering speculation over a genuine completion, we have no choice but to admit that North Korea is a nuclear-armed state.

Denuclearization of North Korea may not be possible at this moment. Nevertheless, we cannot abandon the goal of denuclearization. There have been heated debates whether tightening sanctions can solve the problem. On December 22 last year, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2397 following the DPRK's Hwasong-15 missile test—the latest in a series of sanctions against its nuclear and missile activities. In spite of this, North Korea has had ample time to learn to evade sanctions and even manage to survive under tough sanctions. After all, Pyongyang has been independent from the international system that restrains other nations.

Added to the questions surrounding the effectiveness of the sanctions, President Trump is not clear about the purpose of these sanctions. While top officials in Washington have argued that the focus is to pressure the North Korean regime back to the negotiating table, Trump himself has downplayed the prospects of diplomacy. To Trump, success seems nothing less than Kim's surrender, if not collapse. Kim is interpreting economic sanctions—in tandem with Trump's verbal threats of annihilation and continuing demonstration of military force—as a strategy for regime collapse. The U.S.-DPRK conflict has even become personal, and both leaders' prides are at stake. To solve the problem peacefully in a tension-ridden situation like this, one should never make it hard for an adversary to climb down from a tall tree.

To resolve this kind of crisis, we could easily refer to the comparison with the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962 at the height of the Cold War. The key to solving the crisis was for President Kennedy to understand what the Russian leader, Nikita Khrushchev, needed. In contrast, Trump has been attacking and humiliating Kim Jong-un's sanity, a tactic which will not make him surrender. Instead, it will make him even more likely to cling to his nukes.

The North Korean nuclear threat has rapidly escalated in the months since South Korean President Moon Jae-in's election last May. This has left Moon in a difficult position in dealing with Washington, posing limitations on advancing Seoul's position in the face of not only the mounting insecurity, but also pressure from hardliners in Washington. Although Moon has

actually been very supportive of the U.S. approach of maximum pressure and engagement, his repeated mentions of dialogue as well as claims that war on the Korean Peninsula is unacceptable, are brewing suspicions. Donald Trump once even accused the South Korean president of “appeasement.”

Although President Trump should be given high marks for putting North Korea's nuclear issue as a top priority, his policy toward the DPRK seems to remain in flux. Whereas Trump wants to differentiate his policy from the Obama administration's “strategic patience,” Trump's policy so far has been more like “strategic confusion.” To solve the nuclear headache, the most critical move is for the U.S. to decide whether to resolve the problem or to use the problem to accomplish other goals such as consolidating domestic power or containing China. If Washington genuinely wants to solve the nuclear problem, it should ask for China's help rather than exert pressure on Beijing. Better understanding China's interests on the Korean Peninsula as well as leverage over North Korea and gaining trust are the best ways to draw the Chinese commitment to solving this problem.

A combination of tactics involving the simultaneous application of pressure and engagement should be adopted by utilizing the trilateral cooperation of the U.S, China, and South Korea—this rather than the U.S.-South Korea-Japan trilateral alliance regarded by China as a means to encircle it. In seeking a U.S.-China-South Korea trilateral framework for resolving the North Korean problem, maintaining the division of labor would be critical. While the U.S. and China could act to maximize leverage, they should outsource the task of initiating dialogue to South Korea. Thus far, the U.S. has mostly used the stick even if it is in possession of the best carrots that North Korea wants, and China has provided carrots even if it has the most effective stick that can thoroughly discipline North Korea. Now is the time for Washington and Beijing to return to combining their strengths, while Seoul can work as a mediator to draw cooperation from both countries to maximize efficacy and bring about peace.

After months of increasing tensions, North Korea decided to reopen the long-suspended hotline used for communicating with the South—thus potentially

marking a thaw that has led to agreement for Pyongyang to send a delegation to the 2018 Pyeongchang Winter Olympics. While there is already rising criticism for accepting the North Korean delegation to the Olympics without tangible concessions and change of course by North Korea, this development should be utilized not only for reducing tensions, but also building a platform to solve the nuclear issue. Still, there may be a lot of hurdles ahead to clear.

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A Chinese Perspective

Zhu Feng

The recent agreement between South Korea and North Korea on joint participation in the Pyeongchang Winter Olympic Games has lit the torch of hope for a de-escalation of military tensions on the Korean Peninsula. President Moon Jae-in has vowed to sustain inter-Korean engagement and believes it will contribute to peace. Some observers even optimistically express the hope that it could change Kim Jong Un's mindset and thereby lead to a resumption of denuclearization talks with the United States. However, the current waning of tensions between two Koreas is unlikely to make Pyongyang change course. Rather the international community is increasingly facing the dilemma of either living with a nuclear-capable North Korea, or stepping up international collaboration and cooperation to roll back its nuclear ambitions firmly and workably. With tensions recently having peaked at an all-time high, it would appear that we are running out of time to resolve Pyongyang's nuclear and missile drive.

Despite Kim Jong Un being convinced of the necessity of nuclear weapons to secure domestic supremacy and external autonomy, the fact is that a nuclear armed North Korea is completely unacceptable for the international community, including China. China's fear and worries of a nuclear North Korea are multiple. The first is the issue of nuclear safety. With its nuclear testing site being only around 100 kilometers from the Chinese border, any nuclear leak

or accidental nuclear blast could have catastrophic consequences for China. The second is the deepened geopolitical complexities resulting from the lingering nuclear standoff on the Korea Peninsula. China's relations with South Korea—one its most important trading partners in Asia—have deteriorated due to frictions over the THAAD anti-missile system. Abe's Japan meanwhile is fully exploiting its North Korean concern to reinforce its remilitarization and push hard for constitutional amendment. The trilateral military alliance between Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul is explicitly consolidating. Furthermore, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs could never de-escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula, with any military clash between the North and South inevitably causing damage to China. These trends are obviously counter to Beijing's national security interests. Last but not least, North Korea's nuclear standoff will invariably negatively influence China-U.S. relations, and no one can exclude the possibility of a deepening geopolitical split should Beijing and Moscow acquiesce to Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.

Pleasingly, Beijing's stance toward North Korea is experiencing a dramatic change under the Xi Jinping administration. Beijing's recent determination has been vividly exemplified in its full closure of all North Korean-run restaurants and companies in China. This would represent a big slash in the regime's income through its labor force and commercial undertakings in China. Furthermore, Beijing has sealed its railway and road bridge over the Yalu River, terminated Air China's flight connection to Pyongyang, and agreed on cutting crude oil provisions by more than half in accordance with the latest UN Security Council resolution.

While tightening sanctions, Beijing officially maintains the prospect that denuclearization could be negotiable between Washington and Pyongyang, vocally insisting on a double-freeze – that is, freezing of missile and nuclear tests on the North Korean side in exchange for a suspension of U.S.-South Korea joint military drills. Nevertheless, a declining number of Chinese still harbor the illusion that the Kim Jong Un regime would ultimately abandon its nuclear capability.

Recognizing this, how then should the international community act? First it is necessary to recognize that unless in the highly unlikely case that North Korea provokes a military conflict first, a military option is not desirable. The Trump administration, therefore, needs to refrain from any preemptive military strike vis-à-vis North Korea – the consequences of which would lead to huge casualties and damage not only to the North Korean people but also its neighboring countries. This only leaves us with diplomatic and political options available.

As such, a “two hands approach” is worth trying – pressing and sanctioning Pyongyang as hard as possible, while, on the other hand, actively proposing talks. Talking does not mean appeasing North Korea’s nuclear ambition. Any contacts or talks should be to probe Pyongyang’s real willingness of giving up its nuclear weapons in exchange for concrete measures to respect its survival. But unless there is such an intention on Pyongyang’s part, not even a suspension of nuclear and missile tests will prove a start up to any deal. History has taught us that unprincipled concessions only strengthen the regime and perpetuate the very threats that we seek to end.

The efficacy of a political and diplomatic solution of the nuclear issue should be solidly embedded as part of a comprehensive strategy. This suggests that greater international unity is required to respond to the threat through containment. This in turn necessitates coordinating diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and military instruments according to a strategy of “shared responsibility.” Beijing has been quite unnerved about the assumption that North Korea is China’s liability, and has tended to see the US and North Korea as the main interlocutors in the denuclearization process. Beijing’s change in policy towards North Korea, however, bodes well for closer cooperation and collaboration between China, the United States, and South Korea.

To be successful, the strategy must be directed not only at denuclearization, but also at the abolition of the Cold War-like hostility on the Korea Peninsula. Talking with North Korea while persistently maintaining full-fledged sanctions is what the international community should unchangeably insist on. The following ideas are offered for consideration as fulfillment of “shared

responsibilities” to undergird an effective strategy.

(1) Tightening proactive and multilateral measures that would highlight international solidarity in countering North Korea’s nuclear threat. This should be aimed at further isolating the North through fully and affirmatively suspending or severing ties, and to make known to its leaders the prospect for meaningful consequences in advance of more nuclear and missile tests.

(2) Seeking broad support for the proposition that any further nuclear and ICBM tests would justify escalatory countermeasures including fully cutting oil supplies and, potentially, instituting a blockade, as was done around Cuba in 1962.

(3) Respecting Moon Jae-in government’s effort to reach out to North Korea. Proposing inter-Korean military dialogue and convincing the North to re-launch family reunion activities in fact are conducive to leveraging Seoul’s influence for enlarging cracks in North Korea’s system.

(4) Initiating and funding robust international efforts to expose the human rights violations of the North Korean regime. This is a big vulnerability of the Kim Jong Un regime and perhaps the key to fundamental change from within.

(5) Building up great power consensus and diminishing the negative spillover effect of geopolitical competition arising from the Korea Peninsula and even entire East Asia.

It remains to be seen how long North Korea can withstand ramped up international sanctions and isolation, and what sort of provocations Pyongyang could continuously engage in. Nevertheless, the ball is firmly in Pyongyang’s court. It faces a stark choice of choosing confrontation with the international community, or drawing back from its dangerous nuclear gambit. Should Pyongyang choose the former path through continued testing, this might well cost it to lose all its connections with China. Beijing is close to a full abandonment of North Korea – a fact which could prove to be one of the most significant changes to North Korea.

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A U.S. Perspective

Abraham M. Denmark

The United States and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) are on a collision course. Though this crisis has festered for decades, recent advancements in the DPRK’s missile and nuclear programs, combined with increased pressure from the international community and fiery rhetoric from Washington, has brought tensions to a level unseen for decades. If neither side is able to find a way to back down or return to diplomatic engagement, there is a very real chance that the Korean peninsula, and the broader Asia-Pacific, could descend into a cataclysmic confrontation.

The United States has been consistent in its policy toward North Korea’s nuclear and missile program for decades. Leaders from several administrations have stated that they would not tolerate a DPRK capability to strike the United States with nuclear weapons, and that the United States would never accept the DPRK as a nuclear power. Speaking in early December 2017, National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster said that the DPRK represents “the greatest immediate threat to the United States” and that the potential for war is growing each day. He declared “we are in a race to be able to solve this problem,” and previously questioned whether “classical deterrence theory” applies to the DPRK.

Unfortunately, Kim Jong Un has been unwavering in its commitment to developing nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, despite multiple UN Security Council resolutions prohibiting these programs. Pyongyang views nuclear weapons, and the means to deliver them, as essential to maintain its security in the face of what it perceives as a dangerous external environment. While Pyongyang has said that denuclearization would not be possible “unless the U.S. hostile policy and nuclear threat to the DPRK are definitely terminated,” the requirements of that demand—signing a peace treaty, ending the U.S.-ROK alliance, and withdrawing U.S. forces from the Korean peninsula—have been completely unacceptable to Washington.

These positions are driving a confrontation between

Washington and Pyongyang that could have devastating consequences. The density of several population centers within range of North Korean conventional and unconventional capabilities means that any conflict could put the lives of tens of millions of people at risk. As one observer stated, “Estimates are that hundreds of thousands of South Koreans would die in the first few hours of combat—from artillery, from rockets, from short range missiles—and if this war would escalate to the nuclear level, then you are looking at tens of millions of casualties and the destruction of the eleventh largest economy in the world.” Yet it should be noted that the country most threatened by a conflict on the Korean peninsula is the DPRK itself; unlike any other country, Pyongyang knows (or should know) that a major conflict would likely result in the destruction of their country and the end of their system of government.

It is incumbent on all sides to find a way to avoid such a catastrophe. Denuclearization is likely to remain the goal of the United States for the foreseeable future, even if its likelihood of success is doubtful. There is a range of achievable options short of this ultimate objective that the United States could pursue that would be effective at avoiding a conflict and managing tensions on the Korean peninsula. All sides should understand that U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan are indispensable to Washington and vice-versa. Wedge tactics are unlikely to have lasting strategic benefits for North Korea or China, and are likely only to succeed in driving Washington and its allies closer together.

First would be a diplomatic offensive focused on achieving a freeze in North Korean testing of its nuclear devices and ballistic missiles. A senior U.S. diplomat, empowered with the full support and confidence of the President, would have the ability to engage his or her DPRK counterpart and find a way to achieve a freeze without sacrificing the legitimate security interests of the United States or its allies. Key to this would be an internal American understanding of what combination of concessions it would be willing to put on the table in order to achieve a freeze, as a first depot on the path to a negotiated resolution to the crisis.

Second would be for the United Nations Combined

Forces Command (CFC) to engage the Korean People's Army (KPA) directly, in order to establish effective military-to-military channels designed to reduce the potential for misunderstanding and miscalculation and, eventually, provide another credible channel for communication between the two sides. Potentially including other regional militaries—such as China's People's Liberation Army (PLA), the Republic of Korea (ROK) military, and Japan's Self-Defense Forces (SDF)—this mechanism could be used to inform one another about upcoming exercises and military movements and to rapidly discuss any military-related incidents that may occur.

Third would be efforts by the United States and its allies to maintain a credible deterrent in the face of an evolving threat. While strategic deterrence is likely to hold, there are significant legitimate concerns that—with a credible nuclear capability—Pyongyang may be emboldened to act even more belligerently than it has previously and to employ nuclear blackmail in an attempt to extract concessions from the United States, its allies, and the international community. Buttressing deterrence across the broad spectrum of threats from the DPRK—including strengthening U.S. alliances in the region and enhancing the U.S. regional military presence—would be necessary. This may involve efforts to buttress U.S. military cooperation with its allies, such as enhancing Japanese strike capabilities, strengthening extended deterrence, and fully integrating trilateral missile defense capabilities. Moreover, the United States may begin to consider adjusting its regional force posture to prepare for offensive operations, limited conflict, and counter-proliferation operations.

In spite of repeated assurances from the United States that it does not seek regime change or conflict, the DPRK has been accelerating its illegal nuclear and missile programs—this despite the growing costs of its ambitions to its economy and people. Pyongyang is therefore the driver of instability and uncertainty in the world's most geopolitically significant region. Millions of lives and the global economy hang in the balance, and war will only be avoided if leaders from all sides choose to step away from confrontation and work together, despite their suspicions and doubts, on a more rational course of action.

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