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Time is Running Out for the United States To Address the North Korean Nuclear Threat

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By Fred Fleitz

Do North Korea's nuclear and missile programs represent deterrence to protect it from an attack by the United States that the world can live with, or are they an existential threat to South Korea, Japan and the United States that may require the use of U.S. military force to address?

These questions, which are being debated in light of major advances in both programs over the last two years and reports of collaboration between the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs, go to the heart of difficult decisions that President Trump must make concerning North Korea that could cause or prevent a cataclysmic war.

The Case for North Korea's Nuclear Program as a Deterrent That the World Needs to Live With

Until recently, it was plausible to argue that North Korea might be developing ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons for defensive reasons as a deterrent. North Korean officials have made this argument on many occasions by claiming that their nuclear weapons and the missiles to carry them will prevent the Kim regime from suffering the fate of Saddam Hussein in Iraq and Muammar Qaddafi in Libya.

The North Korean news agency said in January 2016 after North Korea's fourth nuclear test, "History proves that powerful nuclear deterrence serves as the strongest treasured sword for frustrating outsiders' aggression."¹

In addition, there has long been a concern that any use of military force against North Korea would result in a deadly counterattack against South Korea and possibly Japan. Nearly half of South Korea's population of 51 million lives within 50 miles of the demilitarized zone (DMZ). 10 million live in Seoul, only 30 miles from the DMZ. There are 28,500 U.S. troops in South Korea plus family members.

A North Korean counterattack could kill millions. The North has an estimated 8,000 artillery cannons and rocket launchers near the DMZ, many hidden underground, which could fire an estimated 300,000 rounds on the South in the first hour of a counterattack. In addition, North Korea is believed to have hundreds of ballistic missiles capable of striking South Korea and Japan. *The Washington Post* reported on August 8, 2017 that the U.S. Intelligence Community has concluded North Korea could threaten the United States with nuclear weapons because it assesses the North has

¹ Stephen Evans, "The Saddam factor in North Korea's nuclear strategy," BBC.com, September 9, 2016.

“produced nuclear weapons for ballistic missile delivery, to include delivery by ICBM-class missiles.”²

In the same article, the *Washington Post* reported that the U.S. Intelligence Community believes the North has up to 60 nuclear weapons. *The Diplomat* reported in August 2017 that U.S. intelligence agencies also believe North Korea is producing enough nuclear fuel for 12 nuclear bombs per year.³

Many believe that North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missiles are deterrents that it will never give up – and that the cost of attempting to force Pyongyang to do so would be too high. They therefore have concluded that the world needs to learn to live with North Korea’s WMD arsenal and find a negotiated solution. This is the view of most arms control experts, American lawmakers, as well as the leaders of China, South Korea and Russia.

Since mid-2017, North Korea, Russia and China have been promoting a “freeze for freeze” proposal raised by Chinese President Xi last spring to reduce tensions with the North under which Pyongyang would freeze its nuclear and missile programs in exchange for the United States and South Korea suspending joint military exercises. The Trump administration firmly rejected this proposal since it would not reduce the threat from these weapons and would weaken the security of South Korea.

In response to increased U.S. pressure on North Korea to end its nuclear program after its possible H-bomb test last September, Russian President Vladimir Putin said North Korea “will eat grass but will not stop their program as long as they do not feel safe.” During a recent visit to China, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged negotiations over what she described as the overly antagonistic rhetoric of President Trump. Clinton also stated that “inaction is a choice as well” in dealing with the North Korean threat, an ironic comment given the failure of the Obama administration’s policy of inaction toward North Korea.

Other North Korean Weapons of Mass Destruction

In addition to its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, experts believe North Korea has other WMD programs to produce chemical and biological weapons.

North Korea has long been believed to have a chemical weapons program. Its soldiers are known to regularly train in chemical weapons protective gear. The North is suspected of selling chemical weapons and protective gear to other states. In August 2017, two shipments from North Korea to Syria’s chemical weapons agency were intercepted, according to a UN report.⁴

² Joby Warrick, Ellen Nakashima and Anna Fifield, “North Korea now making missile-ready nuclear weapons, U.S. analysts say,” *Washington Post*, August 8, 2016.

³ Ankit Panda, “US Intelligence: North Korea May Already Be Annually Accruing Enough Fissile Material for 12 Nuclear Weapons,” *The Diplomat*, August 9, 2017.

⁴ Martin Chulov, “Two North Korean shipments to Syria intercepted in six months, UN told.” *The Guardian*, August 22, 2017.

The North confirmed the existence of its CW effort on February 13, 2017 when North Korean agents assassinated Kim Jong Un's half-brother Kim Jong Nam in the Kuala Lumpur airport using a deadly chemical weapon, the nerve agent VX, by spearing this agent on his face. North Korea is believed to have between 2,500 and 5,000 tons of chemical weapons that it could use to target the entire Korean peninsula, Japan and U.S. bases by deploying them with artillery, rockets, ballistic missiles and commandos.

North Korea also is assessed to have a secret biological weapons program. Then-Under Secretary of State for Arms Control John Bolton first called out Pyongyang for this program in a speech to the 2001 Biological Weapons Convention (BWC) Review Conference when he said:

“The United States believes North Korea has a dedicated, national-level effort to achieve a BW capability and that it has developed and produced, and may have weaponized, BW agents in violation of the Convention. North Korea likely has the capability to produce sufficient quantities of biological agents for military purposes within weeks of a decision to do so. While we are hopeful that Pyongyang will come into compliance with the BWC and end its program, the fact remains that the BWC has been ineffective in restraining North Korea. The draft BWC Protocol would have done no better.”⁵

Many experts disputed Bolton’s statement in 2001. The U.S. Intelligence Community assessed in 2004 that North Korea was pursuing BW capabilities but only had a “rudimentary biotechnology infrastructure.” However, a bombshell December 2017 article by *Washington Post* reporter Joby Warrick confirmed Bolton’s assessment when he reported what appear to be major advances in North Korea’s biological weapons program, including “factories that can produce microbes by the ton,” “laboratories specializing in genetic modification,” and the acquisition of advanced equipment that could be used to produce and weaponize biological weapon agents. According to Warrick, these developments have alarmed U.S. experts who believe North Korea “could quickly surge into industrial-scale production of biological pathogens if it chooses to do so.”⁶

Bipartisan Policy Failures

In fairness to the Obama administration, North Korea’s nuclear program is a threat that several Republican and Democratic presidents failed to resolve. The George H. W. Bush, Clinton and George W. Bush administrations all attempted diplomacy and concessions to entice Pyongyang to end its nuclear weapons program. North Korea repeatedly pocketed these concessions and failed to live up to its commitments. On many occasions, the same cycle occurred: North Korean provocations to start multilateral talks that it would use to extract concessions, make vague commitments

⁵ Speech by Under Secretary for Arms Control and International Security John R. Bolton to the Fifth Biological Weapons Convention Review Conference, Geneva, Switzerland, November 19, 2001.

⁶ Joby Warrick, “Microbes by the ton: Officials see weapons threat as North Korea gains biotech expertise,” *Washington Post*, December 10, 2017.

and then pause its provocations before resuming them to force new talks and extract more concessions.

According to former Secretary of State Colin Powell, North Korea started cheating on a 1994 nuclear agreement that the Clinton administration negotiated to halt the North's nuclear weapons program, the Agreed Framework, "as the ink was drying." This was a generous, one-sided agreement that provided North Korea with fuel oil and the construction of two light-water reactors. The Agreed Framework postponed sending spent fuel rods – a source of plutonium – out of the country and did not mention the one or two nuclear weapons that the CIA believed North Korea had at the time.

The Agreed Framework collapsed in 2003 after the Bush administration confronted North Korean officials about its cheating on this accord. Bush officials later tried to strike a nuclear agreement with North Korea in 2008 and, as part of these negotiations, agreed to remove North Korea from the U.S. State Sponsor of Terror list in October 2008. After North Korea got all the U.S. concessions it was looking for, it backed out of this agreement a few weeks later. A week before President Bush left office, North Korean officials announced they had weaponized 68 pounds of plutonium – enough for four or five nuclear bombs.

The Failure of Strategic Patience

The North Korean government ignored the Obama administration's determined efforts in 2009 to negotiate a nuclear agreement by conducting a long-range missile test in April 2009 and its second nuclear test on May 21, 2009. After being repeatedly rebuffed by North Korea and preferring to concentrate on getting a nuclear agreement with Iran, the Obama administration adopted Strategic Patience in mid-2012, a policy of inaction toward North Korea, for the rest of the Obama years.

Under Strategic Patience, the Obama administration refused to offer North Korea any incentives to resume nuclear talks and insisted that talks would not resume until the North agreed to end its nuclear program. This policy reportedly was based on the assumption that taking no action on the North Korea situation was acceptable because Pyongyang was unlikely to make the technological advances to turn its primitive nuclear weapons program into a serious regional threat or a threat to the United States. Moreover, this policy also reportedly was based on the belief that the North Korean regime might collapse if left alone.

Strategic Patience was not designed to solve the North Korean threat. It was a policy to kick this problem down the road to the next president.

Under Strategic Patience, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs surged after Kim Jong Un succeeded his father in December 2011. The North conducted its third nuclear test in 2013 and fourth and fifth tests in 2016. These tests were of increasing explosive yields. North Korea claimed to test miniaturized nuclear devices and an H-bomb in 2013. North Korea also engaged in increasingly belligerent rhetoric during this period, including frequent threats to attack the United States with nuclear weapons.

There also was a surge in North Korea's missile program during the Obama years. It conducted 56 missile tests between 2012 and 2016 versus only 31 under the regimes of Kim's father and grandfather. These included more advanced long-range and medium range missiles, cruise missiles, and solid-fueled missiles.

Enter the Trump Administration

North Korea ignored tougher rhetoric by President Trump and continued to expand its nuclear and missile programs in 2017. It conducted an underground nuclear test on September 3, 2017 that it claims was an H-bomb and had an explosive yield of as much as 250 kilotons which would be 25 times more powerful than North Korea's next largest nuclear test in September 2016.

North Korea also conducted 20 missile tests in 2017. These included more advanced designs such as ICBMs, a solid-fueled medium-range missile and a new intermediate-range missile. North Korea's November 29, 2017 ICBM test reached 2,800 miles on a lofted trajectory into space and may have been capable of striking the entire United States on a normal trajectory.

President Donald Trump's anti-North Korean rhetoric, including a threat in his September 2017 UN General Assembly speech to "totally destroy" North Korea if it threatens U.S allies, and tweets criticizing China and South Korea for not pressuring the North have been controversial but appear to have succeeded in helping pass stronger UN sanctions against Pyongyang and convincing China to enforce them.

Are the North Korean and Iranian Nuclear Weapons Programs Collaborating?

There are growing concerns that rapid advances in North Korea's nuclear and missile programs over the last few years may have been due to assistance from other countries and outside experts, possibly China, Russia, Ukraine or Pakistan. In addition, some experts – including Ambassador John Bolton – worry that North Korea and Iran may be collaborating in their nuclear and missile programs and that Tehran may be "outsourcing" its nuclear weapons research to North Korea so it would not be found in violation of a 2015 nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

North Korea has aided Iran's missile program for decades and there have been unconfirmed reports of collaboration between their nuclear programs. According to London's *Sunday Times*, the alleged father of Iran's nuclear program, Moshen Fakhrizadeh-Madabadi, traveled to North Korea to observe a February 2013 nuclear test, a strong indication of collaboration between these rogue state nuclear programs.⁷

⁷ Uzi Mahnaimi, Michael Sheridan, and Shota Ushio, "Iran steps deep into Kim's nuclear huddle," *The Sunday Times*, February 17, 2013.

CIA Director Mike Pompeo said in September 2017, “As North Korea continues to improve its ability to do longer-range missiles and to put nuclear weapons on those missiles, it is very unlikely, if they get that capability, that they wouldn't share it with lots of folks, and Iran would certainly be someone who would be willing to pay them for it.”⁸ Mr. Pompeo’s comment is consistent with fears raised by some experts that Iran may already be helping fund North Korea’s nuclear program.

Addressing the Real Purpose of North Korea’s Nuclear and Missile Arsenal

President Trump has condemned prior U.S. administrations for negotiations with North Korea that he claims amounted to appeasement. The president has been similarly critical of recent calls to negotiate a freeze to North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs because this would lock in existing programs without the guarantee that Pyongyang wouldn’t cheat.

A new factor affecting U.S. North Korea policy is that Pyongyang’s nuclear weapon and missile efforts have grown so much in size and sophistication that they can no longer be considered deterrents – these weapons probably are being developed as an offensive force that Pyongyang will one day use to achieve its most important foreign policy objective: unifying the Korean peninsula under its leadership. It also is likely Pyongyang is developing chemical and biological weapons for these purposes. Such weapons could also be used to drive American forces from the region and to possibly attack U.S. territory. The possibility that these weapons are being developed with Iranian funding and could be shared with Iran also argues against considering them as deterrents that the world can live with.

The chances of a war with North Korea are increasing due to miscalculation or error during tests of its ever more advanced nuclear weapons and missiles as well as the North’s refusal to agree to talks to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. The Trump administration took the right approach in 2017 by increasing sanctions and pressing nations worldwide to sever ties to the North. President Trump also has repeatedly rejected opening talks with North Korea that end up freezing its nuclear and missile programs and providing U.S. economic concessions which he believes would be appeasement.

However, on December 12, 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said that the United States was prepared to open talks with the North “without precondition,” a statement that appeared to back away from the Trump administration’s demand that Pyongyang must accept that giving up its nuclear arsenal would be part of any negotiations. Tillerson also said there would need to be a pause in the North’s nuclear and missile tests before holding such talks. The Trump administration walked back Tillerson’s comment a few hours later and appeared to reiterate an October tweet by President Trump that Tillerson was “wasting his time” by trying to open negotiations with Pyongyang.

⁸ Zachary Cohen, “Could North Korea help Iran develop nuclear weapons?” CNN.com, September 14, 2017.

Because of North Korea's surging WMD programs that it may plan to use offensively in the future, some experts believe President Trump must consider using military force against the North in the near future.

Ambassador John Bolton has been one of the leading proponents of this view, arguing that it is the job of the U.S. president "to protect American citizens from nuclear blackmail by rogue regimes and that is the prospect we face perhaps in a year from now, perhaps less but whenever that point is forever." Although Bolton acknowledges a U.S. military strike on North Korea would pose grave risks for South Korea, he believes when U.S. leaders use this as an excuse for inaction, they are giving North Korea time to develop more powerful and accurate weapons which could strike the United States.

Bolton's position has been strongly opposed by many on the Left and in the mainstream media, most of whom urge negotiations to freeze North Korea's WMD programs and more concessions. Surprisingly, this does not include the *Washington Post* editorial board which echoed Bolton's call for attacking North Korea and regime change in a December 12, 2017 editorial that followed up on Joby Warrick's article cited above on North Korea's biological weapons program. This editorial concluded:

"If Mr. Kim is creating the foundations for a biological weapons program, it should serve as one more warning of the escalating threat he poses. Preemptive war could risk millions of casualties. But his malign intent cannot be tolerated forever. Through sanctions, diplomatic pressure and other means, the burden of Mr. Kim's despotic and reckless reign must be brought to an end."⁹

My recommendation is that President Trump consider carefully calibrated, limited use of military force to change the dynamics of the North Korea situation and compel it to negotiate the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. This limited use of force could include declaring a missile no-fly zone over North Korea, shooting down any missiles Pyongyang tests, a naval blockade and stopping and searching North Korea ships for WMD-related cargo. This course of action hopefully would spare South Korea from a North Korean counterattack and change the policy assumptions of North Korea's leadership by demonstrating that America now has a decisive president who will use – and will escalate – military force to protect the security of the United States and its allies. The limited use of U.S. military force also would make it clear to Pyongyang that the days of appeasement by the United States and its allies are over and that continuing its WMD programs will result in the end of the Kim regime.

The U.S. cannot be sure whether limited military action would result in North Korean retaliation and escalation. (More aggressive military action such as air strikes against nuclear and missile sites would almost certainly lead to this.) But limited military action is a risk worth taking since the alternative is conceding nuclear weapons and missiles to Pyongyang that it will one day use to take control of South Korea, attack Japan drive U.S. forces from the region and possibly attack the United States.

⁹ "There's a deadly new threat from North Korea," *Washington Post* editorial, December 12, 2017.

Limited military action against North Korea by the U.S. – or the prospect of this – could also motivate other nations to significantly increase their pressure on Pyongyang. This might even include China taking action to replace the Kim regime with a more stable, pro-Beijing government.

Deciding to take military action against North Korea probably would be the most difficult decision Mr. Trump will take as president. But I believe President Trump has correctly determined that the global risk posed by North Korea's nuclear and missile programs has become so serious that he cannot kick this threat down the road to the next president.

– Fred Fleitz was chief of staff to Under Secretary of State John Bolton from 2001-2005. He served in national-security positions for 25 years with the CIA, the DIA, the State Department, and the House Intelligence Committee staff. He is now senior vice president of the Center for Security Policy.