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# The End of Illusions

## Trump's North Korea Options

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**For decades, North Korea's nuclear ambitions have been fuelling the ongoing conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Now Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programme appears to have reached an important crossroads as North Korea could soon command a nuclear capability to threaten even the United States directly. If the US intends to continue to pursue its goal of a nuclear weapon-free Korean Peninsula under the arising circumstances, Washington needs to urgently and substantially recalibrate its strategy towards North Korea.**

It seems that any attempts to write off the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) have been highly premature. Contrary to persistent speculation that the system is on the brink of collapse, North Korea's potential as a disruptive force remains undiminished. Regularly, Pyongyang attracts attention by engaging in provocative rhetoric, setting off regional crises and, most notably, by pursuing nuclear weapons.

In his most recent New Year's address, North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un claimed that, with its 2016 test of a hydrogen bomb, the DPRK has taken the final step towards becoming a full-fledged nuclear power, and also referred to ongoing preparations for an intercontinental ballistic missile test. Slowly but surely the North Korean leadership seems to be close to achieving one of the central objectives of their nuclear ambitions. Experts estimate that within as little as five years, North Korea might be in possession of operational warheads and long-range delivery systems and thus capable of launching nuclear strikes even against the US heartland. Given the established second-strike capability of the US, such an attack would mean certain destruction for North Korea, making it highly unlikely that Pyongyang will ever make proactive use of these weapons. North Korea's newfound capabilities would nevertheless not only fundamentally change the strategic balance between the two countries, they would also considerably restrict the already limited range of diplomatic and military options available to the US vis-à-vis the regime in Pyongyang.

In one of his countless tweets, new US President Donald Trump responded to Pyongyang's recent announcements: "North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won't happen!"<sup>1</sup> It remains unclear how Trump plans to translate this statement into action, given that so far he has painted his ideas of US policy on North Korea under his presidency in very broad strokes. If he intends to continue to pursue the strategic goal of a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula, the new US administration will not only have to make North Korea a priority in its foreign policy agenda, it will need to undertake a substantial and urgent review of previous

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<sup>1</sup> Trump, Donald (2017): [twitter@realdonaldtrump](https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/816057920223846400), 2 January, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/816057920223846400>

strategies as well. It is highly doubtful, however, whether it will still be possible to convince North Korea to consider nuclear disarmament. At present, prospects are gloomy. The new US administration and the President in particular, having little experience in foreign policy, would thus be well advised not to delude themselves.

### **How did it come to this?**

The North Korean leadership has been seeking to develop nuclear weapons for quite some time now. Observers estimate that the origins of North Korea's nuclear ambitions can be dated to the mid-1970s. Centre of the program is the Yongbyon nuclear research facility, hosting both a five-megawatt experimental reactor and a reprocessing plant for plutonium fuel rods that is conspicuously oversized for civilian purposes. Parts of the complex, which was considerably extended in the 1980s, were constructed to be hidden and protected in tunnels, suggesting an early military use. Initial suspicions about North Korea's nuclear weapons ambitions were confirmed prior to the first nuclear crisis of 1994 when inconsistencies in the reactor's fuel cycle came to light.

After North Korea had withdrawn from the international Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2003, Pyongyang then passed the nuclear threshold three years later with its first nuclear weapons test. Since then, North Korea has conducted four further tests in the following, the two most recent in January and September 2016. The results suggest that Pyongyang is becoming increasingly capable of controlling the chain reaction process and thus of increasing the explosive force released. North Korea claims to have succeeded in both carrying out a controlled hydrogen bomb explosion and testing a miniaturised weapons design, which has been challenged by independent experts, however. If true, though, both developments could be considered milestones on the road to building an operational warhead.

Observers currently estimate that North Korea may be in possession of a relatively small arsenal of approximately six to eight nuclear weapons. There is lively debate on whether these weapons are actually operational because, in spite of all apparent and suspected progress, there remain a number of technical hurdles on North Korea's road to becoming a nuclear power. It nevertheless seems only a matter of time until Pyongyang will have the technological components and the knowledge required to build an operational warhead as well as reliable long-range delivery systems.

### **The days of hoping and waiting are over**

If the North Korean leadership is to be prevented from achieving its nuclear ambitions, time is of the essence – now more than ever. The problem is that the Obama administration acknowledged time as a factor in its strategy, but one working in its favour. Based on past experience of both previous negotiations and Pyongyang's persistent refusal to adhere to agreements and commitments already made, Washington opted for a policy of "strategic patience". Essentially, this approach rested on the idea that Pyongyang needed to take a credible first step before the US eventually responds.

The results of this strategy have been mixed. While the US succeeded in breaking the cycle of provocation, crisis, negotiations and concessions that Pyongyang had repeatedly deployed to great effect in the past, it has not come any closer to the goal of achieving nuclear disarmament of North Korea. Critics therefore accused the Obama administration of merely waiting for the sanctions of the United Nations Security Council against Pyongyang to come into effect and hoping for Beijing's moderating influence while limiting the US's role to that of a more or less interested bystander,

As former US Secretary of State John Kerry so aptly put it, to Washington, North Korea appears to have become the "land of lousy options".<sup>2</sup> To a certain degree, the passive attitude displayed by the US during President Obama's second term in office with regard to North Korea may thus be due to pent-up frustration and perhaps even resignation in face of Pyongyang's on-going nuclear defiance. This might also explain President Obama's rhetorical retreat to the old, yet insubstantial and currently unhelpful position that, over time, regimes such as North Korea are bound to collapse anyway.<sup>3</sup> However, the time frame the outgoing President referred to in January 2015 is now running against US interests.

### **What's next, Mr President?**

The new US administration under Donald Trump will soon have to deal with the question of how to talk North Korea into nuclear disarmament before it is too late. As of now, Trump has only sporadically commented on the guiding principles and the content of the future US North Korea-policy and some of his statements have been contradictory. A coherent strategy has thus not yet emerged. In principle, the US President has four strategic options for developing such a strategy.

- (1) Trump might continue in his predecessor's path and wait for the problem to resolve itself. Given the continued vitality of the North Korean regime and its nuclear ambitions, this option seems unpromising, though. Contrary to what many observers predicted when Kim Jong-un took office, the young North Korean leader has managed to consolidate his position and his reign appears more stable than ever. The domestic supply situation seems to have stabilised, too. Apart from that, further waiting could increase the risk of proliferation since Pyongyang, in an attempt to generate money for the ever-empty state coffers, might try selling fissionable material and nuclear weapons technology to other nations or non-state actors. Ongoing state-organised illegal activities in the transnational trade in drugs, counterfeit pharmaceuticals, cash, cigarettes and endangered species as well as in human trafficking show that the North Korean leadership is as unscrupulous as it is experienced when it comes to such business models.
- (2) The US might also try to solve the problem by adopting more drastic measures. Tightening existing sanctions may be an option, though one that seems rather unpromising, too. During his campaign, the new US President went one step further. Donald Trump repeatedly brought up military action against the North Korean regime and its nuclear weapons programme as a viable scenario. In his new role as President, he will quickly have to abandon any such positions for good since a military solution of the conflict, while theoretically conceivable, is simply non-existent. Any use of military force against North Korea carries the risk of escalating the conflict beyond control and with unforeseeable consequences, and would also force China to take action as the Sino-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, which includes a mutual defence commitment, still remains valid. And although Beijing has recently expressed great displeasure with North Korea's antics, the Korean Peninsula continues to be of considerable strategic value for China, particularly against the backdrop of increasing tensions between China and the US. In short, there is no leeway for the US to take military action against the North Korean nuclear programme.
- (3) Encouraging China to exert its influence on North Korea, particularly in economic terms, in order to urge the regime towards nuclear disarmament would be another option. This approach appears to become a central element of President Trump's North Korea strategy. During his election campaign, Trump stated that the US should pressure China to utilize its economic power over North Korea to solve the problem in a way that meets US expectations.<sup>4</sup> While this casual statement oversimplifies the real circumstances, it does contain a nugget of truth. North Korea is highly dependent on China, so Beijing does play a key role in

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<sup>2</sup> Kerry, John (2011): U.S. and North Korea: The land of lousy options, in: Los Angeles Times (26 June), <http://articles.latimes.com/2011/jun/26/opinion/la-oe-kerry-north-korea-20110626>

<sup>3</sup> Foster-Caren, Aidan (2015): Obama comes out as a North Korea Collapsist, in: The Diplomat (30 January), <http://thediplomat.com/2015/01/obama-comes-out-as-a-north-korea-collapsist/>

<sup>4</sup> Byrnes, Jesse (2016): Trump: China has 'total control' over North Korea, in: The Hill (1 June), <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/264908-trump-china-should-rein-in-north-korea>

solving the nuclear conflict. However, the administrations of Clinton, Bush and Obama had already arrived at that conclusion, too, and had thus attempted to involve Beijing more. Placing more emphasis on China is therefore not a genuinely new element in the US's North Korea policy.

What Trump does not seem to realise, however, is that Beijing's ability to actually influence Pyongyang appears less great than North Korea's dependency on its only ally and international supporter may suggest. Owing to the Chinese dual role as protector of the system and international sanctioning power, Beijing has found itself caught in a dilemma for some time now. On the one hand, China has a strategic interest in preventing the nuclear armament of North Korea and in containing the ongoing conflict on the Korean Peninsula, which is why Beijing has been supporting the now considerably tightened sanctions of the UN Security Council against the DPRK, and no longer shies away from harsh words for Pyongyang. If, on the other hand, Beijing were to tighten the reins too much, China would risk an uncontrolled collapse of the North Korean state with potentially serious consequences for the People's Republic and its regional interests. Since the Chinese leadership has apparently not yet found a viable way out of its own North Korean dilemma, Beijing is currently focusing on maintaining a minimum of stability of the system. It is safe to assume that Beijing will continue to pursue this approach, especially if US President Donald Trump continues in his clumsy and unhelpful handling of sensitive diplomatic matters such as the disputed status of Taiwan and the One-China principle.

(4) Re-entering into direct negotiations with Pyongyang thus remains as the fourth and last option. During his election campaign, the new President already announced his intention to abandon the previous US strategy – unlike his predecessor, Trump said, he would “absolutely” talk to the North Korean leadership and, given the opportunity, that there is a “10 to 20 per cent chance” for him to persuade Kim Jong-un of giving up “of those damn nukes.”<sup>5</sup>

It may have been statements such as this one that won him a surprising endorsement from Pyongyang. A semi-official editorial published in DPRK Today claimed that, owing to his willingness to withdraw US troops from South Korea and engage in direct negotiations, Trump was the only presidential candidate capable of saving US citizens from the looming threat of a North Korean nuclear attack.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps Trump's unrefined pragmatism is not the worst approach to injecting new momentum into a deadlocked situation such as the North Korea conflict. At least Trump's stated willingness to re-enter into negotiations with the DPRK is likely to be well received in Pyongyang. But Trump should be under no illusion that the North Korean leadership can simply be talked out of its nuclear ambitions.

Besides placing more emphasis on China as a factor, negotiations currently appear to be the only option for the US if it wants to keep its objective of a nuclear weapons free Korean Peninsula alive. However, Pyongyang's willingness to negotiate and thus the chances of the negotiating strategy succeeding both depend on two key factors: the objectives of negotiations and Washington's offer. Past experience shows that the US's maximum demand for a “complete, verifiable and irreversible nuclear disarmament” – while still maintaining a hostile attitude towards North Korea – has proven to be completely unrealistic. For the US, the primary objective should thus consist in negotiating a “freeze” of the nuclear weapons programme at its current stage of development. Given the current conditions, this appears to be the most realistic intermediate objective. While this certainly would not put an end to the conflict, it would buy Washington some much-needed time to set out the next steps based on the, albeit fragile, status quo.

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<sup>5</sup> Gass, Nick (2016): Trump: I'll meet Kim Jong Un in the U.S., in: Politico (15 June), <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/donald-trump-north-korea-nukes-224385>

<sup>6</sup> Jh, Ahn (2016): North Korean editorial supports Donald Trump, in: NK News (31 May), <https://www.nknews.org/2016/05/north-korean-editorial-supports-donald-trump/> Taylor, Adam (2016): North Korea state media offers support for ‘wise politician’ Donald Trump, in: Washington Post (31 May), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/31/north-korean-state-media-offers-support-for-wise-politician-donald-trump/?utm\\_term=.0ad49202b7b5](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/05/31/north-korean-state-media-offers-support-for-wise-politician-donald-trump/?utm_term=.0ad49202b7b5)

Just one question remains: what could the United States offer the North Korean leadership in return? Neither easing existing sanctions nor offering economic incentives is likely to suffice. In order to make progress in negotiations with the North Korean leadership, Washington must begin to take Pyongyang's demands seriously. Besides recognition of North Korea as a nuclear power, one key demand is the conclusion of a peace treaty and the diplomatic recognition of the DPRK by the US that comes with that. Washington has so far refused to respond to the latter demand in particular, which Pyongyang perceives as a fundamental refusal to acknowledge the legitimacy of the North Korean state. Together with the overwhelming conventional and nuclear superiority of the US armed forces and their allies in the region, this creates a serious security deficit for the North Korean regime, which Pyongyang in turn uses to justify its aspirations for developing nuclear deterrents.

### **The end of illusions**

If North Korea is to be brought back to the negotiating table and make substantial concessions, the US will have to address this security deficit of the North Korean regime. One possibility to do so would be to meet Pyongyang's demand for a peace treaty. Without a doubt, the conclusion of such an agreement would be a most welcome development, putting an end to the hostile attitude of both countries at least on paper, which would surely go some way towards improving the overall situation and stabilising bilateral relations.

With regard to the nuclear issue, a peace treaty currently seems to be the only viable option for the US to address the security deficit of the North Korean regime as underlying motive of the nuclear weapons program with formal security guarantees. Pyongyang has already announced its willingness to stop nuclear testing if the US were to consent to this step.<sup>7</sup> Considering the lack of promising alternatives, Washington should seize this opportunity – even if it requires the US government to bite the bullet. This may be the best deal the US could get at the moment. Surprisingly enough, businessman Donald Trump may prove to be the right person in the White House to push for such an agreement against all existing conventions in US North Korea-policy.

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<sup>7</sup> The Telegraph (2016): North Korea offers to stop nuclear tests in exchange for peace treaty (16 January), <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/12102995/North-Korea-offers-to-stop-nuclear-tests-in-exchange-for-peace-treaty.html>