

# Preparing for a North Korean Nuclear Missile

**Denny Roy**

The crisis over North Korea's nuclear-weapons programme, now stretching into a third decade, is worsening. There seems little chance that North Korea will give up its arsenal absent a drastic change in circumstances. Pyongyang has repeatedly said its status as a nuclear-weapons state is permanent, even writing this into its constitution in 2012.<sup>1</sup> In the minds of the North Korean people, elevating the country into the nuclear-weapons club is perhaps the greatest tangible accomplishment of the late Dear Leader, Kim Jong-il (father of current leader Kim Jong-un), as economic development foundered during his tenure. Hopes that Pyongyang might have considered its nuclear-weapons programme as a bargaining chip to be traded away for improved relations with its adversaries have largely faded.

Instead, Pyongyang is working toward producing a reliable, nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that could threaten the US homeland. North Korean technicians are making steady progress. A test of the *Taepodong-2* rocket, which theoretically has the range to reach parts of the United States, failed in 2006, but a civilian variant of the missile successfully carried a payload into space in 2012. Some US intelligence analysts think North Korea is already able to make a nuclear weapon small enough to fit in the nose cone of a ballistic missile.<sup>2</sup> Admiral William Gortney, the commander of US forces responsible for defending North America, said in 2016, 'it's the prudent decision on my part to assume that [North Korea] has the capability to ... miniaturize a nuclear weapon and put it on an ICBM'

---

Denny Roy is a Senior Fellow at the East-West Center.

that can reach 'all of the states of the United States and Canada'.<sup>3</sup> In March 2016 an anonymous South Korean official told Reuters that the North can now mount a nuclear warhead on intermediate-range missiles that can reach all of South Korea and parts of Japan.<sup>4</sup>

There are other technical challenges, including accuracy over long ranges and ensuring the warhead survives the intense heat of re-entry into the atmosphere undamaged. But with determination, and resources dedicated to the programme, Pyongyang will likely achieve a credible nuclear-ICBM capability in the next few years.

The general populations in the countries with which North Korea has poor relations can be expected to react strongly to this development. The US mass media have already begun discussing the idea of North Korea being able to strike the US homeland with a nuclear weapon.<sup>5</sup> If asked to describe the North Korean government as they know it, most Americans would say two things. The first is that the government is irrational (or unstable, crazy or unpredictable). The second is that the country is obsessively hostile to the United States. Indeed, Pyongyang has cultivated this view, apparently anxious for Americans to view North Korean nuclear weapons as a threat to the United States. The messaging is typically unsubtle. In 2013, the North Korean government distributed a video depicting the destruction of Manhattan by a North Korean nuclear missile. Another North Korea-made video released in 2016 featured a nuclear explosion in Washington DC. As Americans come to believe that North Korea can strike their homeland, there will be increased pressure from the US public for Washington to address the new danger. Neglecting North Korea was relatively easy for Americans when it threatened only US allies South Korea and Japan, but it will not be so if Pyongyang can turn Los Angeles into a 'sea of fire'.

### **Maintain the status quo?**

Although five major regional countries have been involved in managing problems arising from North Korea's dissatisfaction with the status quo, the onus of dealing with the new situation of an emerging North Korean nuclear-ICBM capability largely falls on the United States. Japan's attempts to achieve a breakthrough with Pyongyang have foundered on the issue of

North Korea's abductions of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s, and it is doubtful the Kim regime will ever provide an accounting that is sufficiently thorough to satisfy Japanese demands. Russia lacks heavy influence with North Korea and is not directly threatened by its nuclear and missile capabilities. China has influence, but fears regime collapse more than North Korean nuclear weapons, and consequently shelters the regime from decisive pressure to change its policies. The North Koreans tend to bypass Seoul and dismiss its initiatives, preferring to deal directly with Washington.

As many analysts point out, this new phase of the crisis calls for a reassessment of regional policies towards North Korea, given the failure to stop its progress toward a nuclear ICBM. There are four general policy alternatives.

The first option is to maintain the status quo. Washington leaves open the possibility of a 'grand bargain' – economic cooperation in exchange for Pyongyang's willingness to denuclearise – but with little expectation that the North Koreans will accept the deal.

US, South Korean and Japanese relations with North Korea remain stagnant because Pyongyang is not willing to negotiate away its nuclear weapons. The current policy accepts that there is nothing to stop North Korea from making steady progress toward a nuclear ICBM, despite the hardships caused by foreign pressure and economic sanctions. In the meantime, Pyongyang's adversaries try to deter North Korean provocations while waiting for the regime to collapse.

Under the current approach, when North Korea acquires nuclear ICBMs and public anxiety consequently rises, the US government can take unilateral measures to control the damage. American officials can talk about investment in systems that can shoot down incoming missiles; increased funding for these systems will likely be necessary to assuage public fears. US diplomats, political leaders and high-ranking military officers will probably also need to repeatedly reassure South Korea and Japan that the US nuclear umbrella remains intact.

The resiliency of the Kim regime is an important variable here. If policy-makers believe the regime will soon collapse due to internal political and economic stress without any change in the US–South Korean policy of

'strategic patience', and if they further believe a new set of top leaders in North Korea might jettison Kim's commitment to keeping nuclear weapons, they will feel no urgency to abandon the status quo for other, riskier approaches. 'Collapse', in this context, means, at minimum, a change in the top-level leadership to someone not part of the Kim family's innermost circle, probably through a *coup d'état*.

Regime change from within would not guarantee denuclearisation. If, for example, the new paramount authority resided in a junta of senior military officers, some of the worst aspects of North Korean policy might continue, including profound mistrust of South Korea and the United States, a par-

---

### *Regime change would not guarantee denuclearisation*

anoia about losing control over the country if the state were to lift its suffocating domination of North Korean society, and interest in extorting concessions from adversaries through provocations. Regime change might come about as a backlash against Kim Jong-un's political tactics (such as his expansive purges) rather than against his general policy orientation. Thus the new regime might share its predecessor's commitment to fielding nuclear ICBMs.

It is possible, nonetheless, that a new regime might indeed be more favourably disposed toward detente with the US and South Korea. Such an orientation might arise from revulsion towards a Kim regime that lives luxuriously while most of the population is poor and large numbers have starved to death, realisation that the Kim family's governance has left the country economically stagnant and fundamentally insecure, or conviction that, in the long-term interest of the Korean nation, the North should seek peace and greater cooperation with the relatively successful South.

The question could be framed in terms of whether Kim Jong-un will be out of power within ten years, a period of time that is also a reasonable working estimate of how long Pyongyang might need to solve the remaining technical challenges to deploying a reliable nuclear ICBM. This kind of assessment is unusually complex in the case of North Korea.

The conventional approach to answering this question would be to collect indications of apparent regime weakness. These are plentiful. To

begin with, Kim Jong-un would seem personally vulnerable as paramount national leader because he lacks accomplishments that might have garnered him prestige. He is strikingly unqualified, even compared to his father Kim Jong-il, who was himself a pale echo of his father Kim Il-sung. The young Kim attained the ranks of marshal and supreme commander of the Korean People's Army with no known military experience. He became head of the North Korean state before he turned 30, making him the world's youngest national leader in a society that respects age and experience. As for the Kim family's management of the national economy, both elites and ordinary North Koreans are increasingly aware that their country lags far behind other countries, including South Korea and China, in living standards. Some previous sources of the cash and goods that the regime uses to buy the support of North Korean elites are now cut off due to tightened international sanctions, the bankruptcy of the pro-North Korean Chongryon association of Koreans in Japan, and the end of South Korean participation in the Mount Kumgang and Kaesong joint ventures. North Korea's steady outflow (subject to fluctuations in the level of border enforcement) of defectors, combined with Pyongyang's recent campaign to lure defectors back with promises of good treatment, are a symptom of national pathology.<sup>6</sup>

The large number of high-ranking officials Kim has purged since taking power might be either an effect or a cause of regime instability. Four years after his father's funeral in 2011, only two of the seven men who had walked with Kim alongside the hearse were still in their government positions. Scores of others have joined them in oblivion. The number is large enough that some North Korean leaders may be wondering if they should take preemptive action before the executioner knocks.

North Korea, however, is no ordinary state, and what ordinarily are signs of regime distress must be reassessed in light of the country's unique political environment. Reverence for the Kim family is the state religion as well as a core national ideology.

The national media and education system have deified Kim Il-sung ever since he implemented a personality cult in the 1950s to ensure his preeminence above political rivals. According to the official mythology, Kim's birth came in miraculous circumstances, and Kim himself demonstrated

superhuman capabilities through all stages of his life. Most importantly, the mythology makes clear that North Korea's continued well-being and claimed virtues are predicated on adherence to the system Kim established, including the principle of hereditary leadership succession that Kim carried over from centuries of Korean monarchy. If this is the case, the only qualification for supreme leadership that matters is being an anointed descendant of Kim Il-sung. The entire elite, military and bureaucracy will back up Kim Jong-un at all costs because without him, the system would lose legitimacy and crash, taking down all who benefit from it.

The possibility of an individual high-ranking officer from the security forces moving against Kim is a wild card, but, generally speaking, Kim takes good care of the troops. Given that a fundamental national policy gives military strength – and especially a nuclear-weapons capability – equally high priority with economic development (the *byungjin*, or tandem-progress policy), and that the military is allowed to operate its own economic empire, the people wielding most of the guns in North Korea presumably see advantages to supporting the current regime.

As for ordinary North Koreans, the unarmed populace does not appear to be hankering for revolution, despite their hardships. The North Korean government is savvy enough to allow its people the safety valve of (technically illegal) underground markets when the state is unable to fulfil its promised duty of distributing basic necessities to the population. James Chowning Davies' famous 'J-curve' theory of revolution holds that a country is ripe for a social revolution not when its population experiences continual economic malaise, but rather when there is a downturn following a period of unusually rapid economic development.<sup>7</sup> North Korea, which has not seen rapid economic growth since the 1970s, does not fit this profile.<sup>8</sup>

How much the general population likes or dislikes the regime is difficult to judge from the outside. Most of the inside information about life in the country comes from former North Koreans who have defected, and these are not necessarily a representative sample of those who remain. On the one hand, we have reports such as that from Shin Ju-hyun, editor of the respected investigative news outlet Daily NK, who says of his extensive contacts in the North, 'Nine out of ten of my friends in North Korea say,

“We should change the government”, but can’t.”<sup>9</sup> One of the reasons they can’t is the absence of an organisational infrastructure outside of government institutions. While not impossible, it would be extremely difficult for the civilian population to mount an insurrection serious enough to threaten the state unless they did so in overwhelmingly large numbers. Yet there is evidence the North Korean people harbour considerable loyalty toward their government. Bruce Cumings argues the regime’s neo-Confucian, paternalistic approach resonates with a North Korean society that is steeped in Confucianism and has known nothing in its long history but monarchy and dictatorships.<sup>10</sup> B.R. Myers says North Koreans give their government credit for providing intangible benefits, such as keeping the North more authentically Korean than the allegedly compromised South and its government of supposed US stooges.<sup>11</sup> Thus, even increasing knowledge about the outside world – through such means as smuggled-in DVDs – does not automatically prime ordinary North Koreans to revolt, even when they become aware of contradictions between reality and the claims of state propaganda.

In sum, despite the profound difficulties the country is muddling through, collapse of North Korea’s ruling regime does not appear imminent. And even if there was internally induced regime change, the nuclear-weapons crisis might continue under new management. Thus, if the United States, China and the major Asia-Pacific states continue their present policies toward North Korea – including announced agreements to tighten sanctions after each nuclear test – Washington, Seoul and Tokyo face the challenge of explaining to their societies why they must learn to live with a deliverable North Korean bomb.

### **Negotiate limits?**

A second alternative, increasingly advocated by strategic analysts, is to negotiate a cap on the North Korean missile and nuclear-weapons programmes. Pyongyang has indicated it is receptive to this idea: in January 2015, January 2016 and April 2016, the North Korean government offered to halt nuclear tests if the United States would discontinue its large, annual joint military exercise with South Korea, but neither Washington nor Seoul showed interest in discussing such a deal.<sup>12</sup>

The argument for this alternative is that, since denuclearisation is no longer an option, the new strategy should be to seek the more realistic goal of placing limits on North Korea's arsenal. Some analysts argue that a freeze within the next few years could lock North Korea's programmes in a 'sweet spot', where Pyongyang is confident it has enough nuclear capability to deter an invasion by the South Koreans or an attack by the Americans, but not enough capability to pose an offensive threat to any other country. Cumings asserts that 'a handful of nukes will provide security and deterrence for an insecure leadership', but 'otherwise they are useless'.<sup>13</sup> Obviously, this policy would require dropping the demand that Pyongyang commit to denuclearisation before negotiations take place. North Korea would get its wished-for recognition, at least implicitly, as a nuclear-weapons state. This approach could be called the Iran model because it aims to settle only the nuclear-weapons issue without transforming the overall relationship. Adversaries would remain adversaries with many other points of dispute. It is possible, however, that a mutual agreement on North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes could clear the way for negotiation on other issues. This is Pyongyang's transparent objective: to extract from its adversaries acknowledgement of its upgraded status before Pyongyang revisits with them other long-standing North Korean grievances and demands for concessions.

If North Korea accepted a credibly verifiable agreement to halt its nuclear-weapons and missile programmes short of a nuclear ICBM capability, the impending intensification of the crisis could be avoided. The other, perhaps more likely, cap scenario would leave it with a minimum nuclear deterrent: a small arsenal of nuclear ICBMs and other missiles targeting key adversaries. For the deal to work, the regime would need to believe this arsenal could survive an attempt by an enemy to pre-emptively destroy the missiles. There would be a natural tension between, on one hand, North Korea's need for a survivable deterrent, and, on the other hand, the demand of potential target countries for assurance that their governments could protect them from nuclear attack.

A policy of negotiating a verifiable cap has the virtue of offering a chance of stopping the progress that is unchecked under the status quo. An agreed

cap would align US policy – which currently does not recognise North Korea as a nuclear-weapons state – with reality.

Negotiating a cap with Pyongyang presents several problems, however. Accepting a permanent North Korean nuclear arsenal would deeply upset Seoul and Tokyo. Concluding that the long-term US effort to deny North Korea a nuclear-missile capability had finally failed would incentivise Seoul to rely more heavily on the (dubious) prospect of relief through Chinese intervention, increasing Beijing's relative influence with the South Korean government. Japan's latent fear of abandonment by its US ally would resurface, prompting Japanese reassessments of the value of the alliance. Official US acquiescence to a nuclear-armed North Korea would strengthen arguments in both South Korea and Japan to develop and deploy their own nuclear weapons. This would be a highly adverse development for opponents of any new nuclear proliferation, including the US government.

Secondly, the precedent of a small but nuclear-armed state successfully coercing the United States into accepting its nuclear status would damage global confidence in both the non-proliferation regime and US leadership of the liberal, rules-based international order. Washington's position for over a decade has been that no negotiations with North Korea can take place unless Pyongyang first recommits to the 2005 agreement, which reads in part, '[North Korea] committed to abandoning all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs and returning, at an early date, to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons and to IAEA safeguards', while the other parties agreed to assist North Korea's nuclear-energy programme.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, this framework soon collapsed over the question of whether North Korea would denuclearise before or after receiving a light-water reactor for electrical-power generation. This subsequently stalemated US–North Korea relations. Washington demands a recommitment to denuclearisation as a precondition to negotiations, which would mainly focus on the reward North Korea would get for giving up its nuclear weapons. Pyongyang, however, has taken the opposite stance, that negotiations should begin with the premise, implicit or otherwise,

---

*Japan's fear of abandonment would resurface*

that North Korea is a nuclear-weapons state. Dropping its precondition for negotiations with North Korea would represent a humiliating defeat of the superpower United States at the hands of a fundamentally weak, 'rogue' state. This could embolden Pyongyang to drive harder bargains with Washington in the future, while also encouraging dangerous behaviour by other antagonists of the United States and its allies around the globe.

Thirdly, a premise of the argument in favour of negotiating a limited nuclear capability for North Korea is that Pyongyang would accept an agreement that left it without the means to seriously threaten South Korea, the United or Japan; otherwise a cap would not be desirable from the standpoint of Pyongyang's adversaries. This premise is questionable. Without a credible means of carrying out nuclear attacks on its adversaries' homelands, North Korea has no way to deter attacks or invasion by its enemies except by proliferating nuclear material or technology to dangerous third parties or detonating nuclear weapons on or near its own territory. While these are frightening enough possibilities, they would still leave Pyongyang with a relatively weak hand and limited options for responding to attacks short of invasion. Even an agreement that allowed North Korea to deploy a small number of nuclear-armed ICBMs, probably more than the United States government could accept, would offer limited and probably insufficient security to the North Koreans, because it is plausible that improving missile-defence systems could defeat a small North Korean arsenal, negating its deterrent value. For these reasons it is unlikely that the North Koreans would agree to a capped programme within parameters acceptable to Washington.

One could argue, of course, that we cannot be sure what either side would agree to unless we try. We should bear in mind, however, that even the decision to open negotiations would have serious costs. During these negotiations, which might be lengthy, North Korean technicians would continue to make progress. And even if the talks resulted in an agreement, based on past experience there is a strong chance Pyongyang would seek to evade the agreed restrictions, continue to expand its capabilities and eventually call for a renegotiation of the agreement in its own favour. Robert E. Kelly argues that, since the North Korean government will never feel

confident that it could protect a small arsenal from a pre-emptive enemy strike, it has a driving incentive to build up a large arsenal of perhaps 100 missiles to ensure some would survive a first strike.<sup>15</sup> This incentive might compel Pyongyang to cheat against an agreed cap. It is simply unrealistic to expect that even a strong set of verification procedures could overcome a determined North Korean effort to hide certain facilities engaged in prohibited activity, particularly now that it can produce fuel for bombs from uranium enrichment (which requires relatively smaller infrastructure), as well as from plutonium.

### **Force a halt?**

A third alternative would be to greatly increase pressure on Pyongyang to force it to stop making progress toward a nuclear ICBM, either with the intent of causing regime change or with the acceptance of regime change as a possible consequence. This approach only makes sense if living with a North Korean nuclear ICBM is less tolerable than the risks of externally forced regime change and the expected problems of dealing with the aftermath.

The international community did in fact increase pressure on North Korea in early 2016. Like the previous nuclear-test detonations, North Korea's fourth test resulted in additional sanctions against the country by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) after the usual haggling among its members. UNSC Resolution 2270, announced on 2 March 2016, is considerably tougher than its predecessors. It requires inspection of all cargo into and out of North Korea that passes through third countries, and narrows North Korea's use of the international financial system. Some analysts believe that, if fully enforced, the new sanctions could cause the regime to consider changing its policy course.<sup>16</sup> If this observation is correct, the new round of sanctions would represent a dramatic policy change by the North's adversaries.

There are two reasons, however, to consider the 2016 sanctions a tweak of previous policy rather than a shift to a posture of seeking results even at the risk of regime change. Firstly, as in the past, China's diligence in enforcing the agreed sanctions is in question. China, North Korea's most important

trading and strategic partner, has typically struck a balance between keeping up the appearance of good international citizenship and ensuring that Kim's regime does not suffer so much that it becomes vulnerable to collapse. When the US government imposed its own sanctions on North Korea outside of UNSC Resolution 2270, the Chinese government immediately criticised the move, using the usual formulations. 'China always opposes any country imposing unilateral sanctions', said Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang, and 'we oppose any moves that may further worsen the tensions'.<sup>17</sup> China's attitude towards North Korea has clearly hardened as it has persisted with nuclear and missile tests, a point punctuated by chief Chinese North Korea

---

*New sanctions  
are not  
necessarily  
enough*

envoy Wu Dawei's remark that, with the fourth test, Pyongyang 'signed its own death warrant'.<sup>18</sup> Initial reports indicated China was enforcing UN sanctions more vigorously than before.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, unprecedented toughness in the Chinese response to North Korean action does not mean the Chinese government has altered its fundamental position of avoiding a collapse of the regime at all costs. Most of North Korea's trade is with China, which supplies almost all of North

Korea's oil. The latest round of sanctions does not require China to cut this growing trade. Beijing has always reserved the right to transfer goods to North Korea for 'humanitarian' purposes – in effect providing what Scott Snyder calls 'an economic safety net' for the regime.<sup>20</sup>

Secondly, given the regime's staying power, even the new sanctions are not necessarily enough to force Pyongyang to give up the development of a nuclear-armed ICBM. North Korea is already heavily sanctioned and accustomed to hardship. The regime has survived decades of relatively poor economic performance, the death by starvation and under-nourishment of an estimated half a million of its citizens,<sup>21</sup> and restrictions on the outside supply of the luxury goods with which the Kims have bolstered the loyalty of elites. Short of a total embargo that would include food and energy, North Korea's capacity to resist may exceed the leveraging strength of the outside world. Asked about increased pressure from the Chinese to denuclearise, So Se-pyong, the North Korean ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva,

said defiantly, 'Whether they are going to do anything, we don't care. We are going on our own way, not having dialogue and discussions on that.'<sup>22</sup>

As they did prior to the fourth nuclear test, the other major Asia-Pacific states apparently seek to apply a degree of pressure strong enough to compel policy change in Pyongyang, but not strong enough to endanger the survival of the regime or to push it into a desperate war. A policy that would accomplish this exists in theory, but not necessarily in reality. Overthrow of the regime is probably the only way to achieve denuclearisation.

Analysts such as former US State Department official Evans Revere have long argued that much tougher sanctions are possible, going far beyond even those outlined in UNSC Resolution 2270. Intensified sanctions might include stronger and more frequent US–South Korea military exercises, including drills that simulate realistic attacks on North Korean military assets; a complete shutdown of Pyongyang's use of the international financial system by blacklisting any banks or companies that do business with North Korea; and a reduction of oil supplies.<sup>23</sup> Such actions would, of course, imply acceptance of the risk of regime change. The fact that North Korea's adversaries have not tried to implement more onerous sanctions is further evidence these governments are not ready for regime change, even if some are more ready than others.

Switching to a higher-pressure strategy against Pyongyang involves two problems. Firstly, it is not clear that the prospect of living with a North Korean nuclear ICBM is worse than the risks and costs of regime overthrow, especially for front-line states China and South Korea. For China, this scenario raises fears of war on the peninsula, massive refugee inflows from North Korea, banditry in bordering Chinese provinces, the replacement of an anti-US buffer state with an enlarged US ally on the Chinese border, loss of the favourable deals under which the Chinese buy North Korean resources, and possibly stronger irredentist Korean claims to territory on the Chinese side of the border. For South Korea, regime overthrow means hastening the time when Seoul must take over management of the northern part of the peninsula. South Koreans support reunification in theory, but generally are far from eager to take on the responsibilities and expenses that would come with absorbing North Korea.<sup>24</sup>

Secondly, in practice, except in the case of an outbreak of major war, a policy of high pressure that risks regime change would not be feasible unless all three of these countries agreed to it. But the United States, South Korea and China each have different levels of tolerance for the status quo. The United States greatly fears North Korea's nuclear-weapons programme, but would be relatively isolated from the consequences of regime collapse. China is the opposite, not directly threatened by North Korean nuclear weapons but fearful of the turmoil of regime collapse spilling over its border. Seoul fears the North's nuclear programme less than the United States because it finds the prospect of North Korea sharing nuclear material or technology with a terrorist group less worrisome. Like the Chinese, South Koreans fear the problems caused by a hard North Korean landing, but, unlike the Chinese, see reunification as a positive long-term development. Only in an extreme circumstance would these three governments simultaneously reach the conclusion that their interests are best served by North Korean regime change.

### **Transform the relationship?**

The fourth alternative is to seek rapprochement with North Korea, starting with the United States making a set of large, unilateral concessions. Japan could join in if it could lay aside the abduction issue. South Korea would likely be an observer initially, since Pyongyang has historically sought to deal directly with Washington and to sideline Seoul.

Rapprochement would go beyond merely defusing the ongoing crisis. This would be an attempt to transform the relationship from adversarial to cooperative. Acknowledging North Korea as a nuclear-weapons state, explicitly or otherwise, would be a bare-minimum necessity. Washington would also probably need to offer some form of security guarantee, grant diplomatic recognition to North Korea, reduce US government criticism of the regime and remove at least some of the restrictions forbidding US citizens from doing business with North Korea. An extreme form of this policy might see Washington putting the US–South Korea alliance, and US military bases in Korea, on the table as part of negotiations for a peace treaty. Because the United States would make most of the initial concessions,

this might be called the Cuba model. The expectation would be that these concessions would clear the way for not only an end to provocative behaviour by Pyongyang, but even strategic cooperation to alleviate North Korea's dependence on China, which the North Koreans would presumably welcome.

If Washington decided to pursue this policy, giving face to Pyongyang would be a good start. Gaining prestige and honour among outsiders is extremely important to the North Korean regime, in keeping with the traditional Korean emphasis on *kibun* (face, or pride). The North Korean government deeply desires recognition as a normal, respectable nation-state, especially from Washington.<sup>25</sup>

Yet US officials routinely speak more harshly of North Korea's government than of the quasi-adversaries who rule countries such as Russia, Iran and China. As secretary of state, Hillary Clinton compared the North Korean government to 'small children and unruly teenagers ... acting out'.<sup>26</sup> President George W. Bush said 'I loathe Kim Jong-il', and also called him a 'tyrant', a 'spoiled child', and a 'pygmy'.<sup>27</sup>

The regime has shown itself highly sensitive to insults, especially to the supreme leader. A recent example was Pyongyang's reaction to the movie *The Interview*, which climaxes with a depiction of Kim Jong-un's violent death. Leaving aside the retaliatory cyber attack on the offices of its distributor, Sony Pictures Entertainment – attributed by Washington to the North Korean government, a conclusion some cyber experts dispute – the movie clearly outraged Pyongyang. A North Korean government-controlled media outlet said the film 'hurts the dignity' of the country's leadership, is 'touching off the towering hatred and wrath' of the North Korean people, and represented 'the most undisguised terrorism and a war action' on the part of the United States because it aimed to 'deprive ... people of the DPRK of their mental mainstay'.<sup>28</sup> A spokesman for the North Korean National Defense Commission, blaming US President Barack Obama for the release of the film, said 'Obama always goes reckless in words and deeds like a monkey in a tropical forest'.<sup>29</sup>

If Pyongyang reacts badly to perceived insults, the reverse may also be true. The North Korean government is capable of returning graciousness for

courtesy. In 2007, a nearby US Navy vessel sent medical staff in response to a request for aid from the crew of the North Korean cargo ship *Dai Hong Dan*, which had just fought off a pirate attack. In a rare positive statement about the United States, North Korea's KCNA news agency said, 'We feel grateful to the United States for its assistance given to our crewmen.'<sup>30</sup>

This raises the question of how North Korean foreign policy might change if Washington gave the regime face by speaking publicly of North Korea in the usual polite language of diplomacy, often used even for countries with which the United States has poor relations. The US government has long experience with emphasising the positive and soft-peddalling the

---

*Cordiality  
towards North  
Korea is not  
unprecedented*

negative when discussing 'friendly dictators'. Saudi Arabia hardly conforms to mainstream American political culture. The Saudi government, for example, publicly beheads those judged guilty of a wide variety of non-violent offences. But while the US government consistently acknowledges 'concerns' about human-rights practices in Saudi Arabia, these are not deal-breakers. Two weeks after Saudi authorities executed 47 convicts in a single day, US Secretary of State John Kerry pro-

claimed, 'We have as solid a relationship, as clear an alliance, and as strong a friendship with the kingdom of Saudi Arabia as we've ever had.'<sup>31</sup> Even in the midst of a downturn in relations driven by Xi Jinping's increasingly aggressive South China Sea policy and hardening authoritarianism within China, Kerry was able to say of US-China relations that 'we've been able to cooperate in areas where our interests and our values are aligned, despite the fact that we have clear differences on some other issues'.<sup>32</sup>

Similarly, official US cordiality toward North Korea is not unprecedented. During a brief period when a breakthrough looked possible, George W. Bush wrote Kim Jong-il a personal letter that began with the salutation 'Dear Mr. Chairman'.<sup>33</sup> After then-US secretary of state Madeleine Albright met Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang and had returned home, she told a US audience that Kim 'is not the kind of peculiar person, I think, that has been described by many people who have never seen him before, but he is somebody that I had quite a logical and pragmatic discussion with'.<sup>34</sup>

An initially unilateral US rapprochement would go a long way towards addressing perennial North Korean demands. It would raise the DPRK's status by tacitly recognising it as a nuclear-weapons state, by establishing normal diplomatic relations, and by US officials speaking less disrespectfully of the Pyongyang government. It would tangibly demonstrate a reduction in the American 'hostility' often mentioned in North Korean rhetoric. It would open the way for potential new economic benefits to flow into North Korea. If national insecurity and perceived disrespect are the sources of North Korean provocations, seeking rapprochement is arguably a productive approach, and even a good bargain, despite what Washington would give away.

There are, however, some serious drawbacks to this idea. Firstly, this policy would be a very tough domestic political sell for any US president, who could expect that many members of Congress and respected media commentators would condemn a rapprochement based on the abandonment of several long-held US positions as demonstrating weakness, naivety and lack of commitment to traditional American values. Critics would call it a reward for egregiously bad behaviour by the North Korean government, both domestically and internationally. Pursuing this policy would be somewhat more feasible for a president who had a reputation for toughness and competence in foreign policy – a Nixon, as opposed to an Obama.

Secondly, rapprochement with North Korea might put the United States in a position to be played off against China. As a new friend of Pyongyang, Washington might face constant demands for additional economic or political payouts under the threat that otherwise North Korea would gravitate closer to Beijing. North Korea previously leveraged its relationships with China and the Soviet Union this way.

Thirdly, the North Korean leadership would likely have difficulty grasping the concept that the US government cannot prevent private media, non-governmental organisations, members of Congress or other prominent Americans from continuing to criticise the regime in Pyongyang. Such criticism would likely increase in the immediate aftermath of a Pyongyang–Washington rapprochement as opponents of the policy filled the internet and airwaves with angry commentary. Many, if not most, North Korean

elites would interpret this as US government duplicity, which might immediately put the deal in jeopardy by testing the thickness of the young Kim's skin.

Finally, the idea of rapprochement assumes that Pyongyang *wants* peace with its current adversaries. Not everyone accepts that assumption. Myers argues that the regime believes its legitimacy depends on continuous tension with an American adversary. Pyongyang blames the United States for preventing reunification (a way of hiding the ugly secret that South Koreans are not eager to join with the backward North), holding down North Korea's standard of living and keeping the North endlessly on a war footing. The regime's right to rule is based on its heroism in standing up to a hostile and powerful United States and protecting the North Korean people from the various disasters that would otherwise befall them, Myers writes. If this is the case, the regime would never assent to a permanent improvement in relations with either Washington or Seoul.<sup>35</sup>

In seeking rapprochement, Washington would therefore be vulnerable to getting nothing for its ample concessions – some of which would be revocable in case of North Korean bad faith, but others (such as ending the US–South Korea alliance) perhaps not.

\* \* \*

As is typical of intractable and long-running problems in foreign affairs, the challenge posed by the worsening North Korean nuclear crisis is to identify which policy alternative is the least bad.

Attempting to negotiate a cap on North Korea's nuclear-weapons and missile programmes presents too many downsides to be seriously considered. Severe problems would arise throughout the process, beginning with the extremely controversial decision to begin negotiations, and continuing through the very end with doubts about North Korea's fidelity in implementing an apparently successful agreement.

The policy of applying overwhelming denuclearise-or-bust pressure on the regime is not a viable option unless and until South Korea and China are convinced that the problems of the status quo outweigh the anticipated

problems of regime change. Clearly, Seoul and Beijing have not yet arrived at that point, even with the looming prospect of a North Korean nuclear ICBM. Indeed, crisis stability has perhaps strengthened somewhat since 2010, with lethal provocations by North Korea becoming a rarity after Seoul committed itself to a policy of military retaliation.<sup>36</sup>

Seeking a rapprochement by offering substantial unilateral US concessions would test the proposition that Pyongyang really wants reduced tensions, and the outcome of that test is uncertain. But in any case, this policy is not politically possible for the United States. President Obama absorbed considerable criticism for seeking a reconciliation with Cuba, a move he saved for his last years in office. While strong feelings against the Castro regime are limited to a relatively small segment of American society, the North Korean government is widely reviled in the United States for multiple reasons, including a reputation for cheating on agreements and a record of human-rights abuses that is exponentially worse than Cuba's. The disincentives are so much greater than the incentives that it is hard to conceive of a president choosing what Americans would perceive as a craven policy of offering gifts and honour to a despised dictator as a response to a North Korean nuclear ICBM.

The net assessment, then, is that the basic US policy of the last decade will continue, even with the changed status quo of a North Korean nuclear-ICBM capability. Sanctions may stiffen, but without the aim of regime change.

This new capability will position Pyongyang to cause temporary spikes in anxiety among Americans, South Koreans and Japanese, according to Pyongyang's own timetable, by making belligerent statements and gestures connected to nuclear threats. Pyongyang might successfully scare the US public into forcing Washington to reassess the value of the annual spring US–South Korea military exercises. With time and experience, Americans and other threatened populations will likely eventually calm down, viewing repeated threats as bluffs and gaining confidence that North Korea is not so foolish or crazy as to attempt a cold nuclear strike on the US, Japan or South Korea. Indeed, the antidote to the hysteria in countries that fear a North Korean nuclear attack is the understanding that Pyongyang is shrewd

and rational, contrary to the deeply ingrained popular misconception. The regime could not fire a nuclear missile against the United States or an ally without ensuring the regime's own destruction, either through nuclear counter-attack or through an invasion determined to uproot North Korea's government and erase its statehood. It is safe to assume Pyongyang understands this, based on its decades-long record of carefully avoiding acts that would have brought on all-out war. If North Korea cannot use its nuclear ICBM, neither can it credibly threaten a nuclear attack as a means of extortion.

The desperation surrounding this issue should subside when we understand that North Korea upgrading its capabilities, by adding a delivery system to its possession of nuclear weapons, actually does little to alter the strategic environment in Northeast Asia. Not only is there no rationale for their first use aside from deterring an invasion of North Korea by South Korean and US forces, but even that deterrent was unnecessary in the first place because there was no intent by Seoul or Washington to invade.

Although a frightening and unwelcome development, the North Korean nuclear ICBM is not a game-changer. Adversaries will continue to wait out the Kim regime, albeit less comfortably.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> As one example of many such statements, North Korea's nominal head of state, Kim Yong-nam, has said, 'our nuclear weapons capability is the treasure of a unified Korea ... that we would never barter at any price'. See 'North Korea Ready to Develop Relations, Ensure Stability "As a Responsible Nuke State"', *Russia Today*, 14 April 2013, <https://www.rt.com/news/north-korea-nuke-state-844/>.
- <sup>2</sup> Barbara Starr and Ryan Browne, 'Intel Officials: North Korea "Probably" Has Miniaturized Nuke', *CNN*, 25 March 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/24/politics/north-korea-miniaturized-nuclear-warhead/>.
- <sup>3</sup> J.S. Chang, 'U.S. Commander: N. Korea Can "Range Continental U.S." With ICBM', *Yonhap*, 11 March 2016, <http://english.yonhapnews.co.kr/news/2016/03/11/0200000000AEN20160311000300315.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> Jack Kim, 'North Korea Can Put Nuclear Warhead on Mid-Range Missile: South', *Reuters*, 5 April 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-idUSKC-NoX21EM>.
- <sup>5</sup> See, for example, Jim Sciutto, 'Does North Korea Have Missiles that

- Reach the U.S.?', CNN, 6 January 2015, <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/world/2015/01/06/tsr-dnt-sciutto-nk-nuclear-capability.cnn>; Steve Almasy and Euan McKirdy, 'North Korea Claims to Have Nuclear Warheads That Can Fit on Missiles', CNN, 10 March 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/08/asia/north-korea-nuclear-warheads/>; and 'Could a North Korean Missile Hit the U.S.?', CBS, 6 January 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/could-north-korea-missile-hit-us-mainland/>.
- 6 Ju-min Park, 'North Korea's Kim Tries New Tack with Defectors – Being Nice', Reuters, 18 August 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/korea-north-defectors-idUSL4NoGF1CR20130818>.
  - 7 James Chowning Davies, 'Toward a Theory of Revolution', *American Sociological Review*, vol. 27, no. 1, February 1962, pp. 5–19.
  - 8 Korea Development Institute, *Economic Indicators of North Korea* (Seoul: Korea Development Institute, 1996); Bank of Korea, 'Data on the North Korean Economy', Seoul, 2003.
  - 9 Andrew Salmon, 'What North Koreans Really Think of Kim Jong-un', *Telegraph*, 8 April 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/northkorea/9191998/What-North-Koreans-really-think-of-Kim-Jong-un.html>.
  - 10 Bruce Cumings, 'Getting North Korea Wrong', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, vol. 71, no. 4, July 2015, pp. 70–1.
  - 11 B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (New York: Melville House, 2010).
  - 12 See Jon Min Dok, 'Suspend the U.S.–South Korea Joint Military Exercises for Peace', *NK News*, 15 March 2016, <https://www.nknews.org/2016/03/suspend-the-u-s-south-korea-joint-military-exercises-for-peace/>; and 'N. Korea's Kim Hails "Successful" Submarine Missile Test', Agence France-Presse, 23 April 2016, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/north-koreas-kim-hails-successful-submarine-missile-test-031123917.html>.
  - 13 Cumings, 'Getting North Korea Wrong'.
  - 14 'Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks', Beijing, 19 September 2005, available at <http://www.state.gov/p/eap/regional/c15455.htm>.
  - 15 Robert E. Kelly, 'Will South Korea Have to Bomb the North, Eventually?', *Diplomat*, 6 March 2015, <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/will-south-korea-have-to-bomb-the-north-eventually/>.
  - 16 See David Francis, 'Beijing Blasts New U.S. Sanctions on North Korea', *Foreign Policy*, 17 March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/17/beijing-blasts-new-u-s-sanctions-on-north-korea/>; Audie Cornish interview with Evans Revere, 'What the Nuclear Weapons Test Reveals about North Korea's Goals', National Public Radio, 6 January 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/01/06/462176178/what-the-nuclear-weapons-test-reveals-about-north-koreas-goals/>; and Thomas Byrne, 'Why the New Sanctions on North Korea Might Work', *Wall Street Journal*, 1 March 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-the-new-sanctions-on-north-korea-might-work-1456874236>.

- 17 'China Opposes Unilateral Sanctions on DPRK', China Central Television, 17 March 2016, <http://english.cntv.cn/2016/03/17/VIDEs3eBAAZA1TynXFMq7eLr160317.shtml>.
- 18 Kim Dae-gi, 'Wu Dawei Says "N. Korea Signed Its Own Death Warrant"', Maeil Business News Korea, 3 March 2016, <http://pulse-news.co.kr/view.php?sc=30800018&year=2016&no=168073>.
- 19 See 'China Complies with Sanctions Against N.Korea', *Chosun Ilbo*, 18 March 2016, [http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html\\_dir/2016/03/17/2016031700828.html](http://english.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/03/17/2016031700828.html); Sarah Kim, 'China Tells Border Firms Not to Buy North's Coal', *Joong Ang Daily*, 17 March 2016, <http://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/news/article/Article.aspx?aid=3016320>; and Jonathan Pollack, 'China and North Korea: The Long Goodbye?', Brookings Institution, 28 March 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/order-from-chaos/posts/2016/03/28-china-north-korea-sanctions-pollack>.
- 20 Quoted in Eleanor Albert and Beina Xu, 'The China–North Korea Relationship', Council on Foreign Relations, 8 February 2016, <http://www.cfr.org/china/china-north-korea-relationship/p11097>.
- 21 This is a lower-end estimate cited by North Korea expert Andrei Lankov as he made the point that starvation in North Korea is exaggerated. Andrei Lankov, 'N Korea and the Myth of Starvation', Al-Jazeera, 27 March 2014, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2014/03/n-korea-myth-starvation-2014319124439924471.html>.
- 22 Stephanie Nebehay, 'North Korea to Pursue Nuclear and Missile Programs – Envoy', Reuters, 1 April 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-envoy-exclusive-idUSKCN0WY4L2>.
- 23 Choi Sung-jin, 'US Experts Say "Strategic Patience Is Over"', *Korea Times*, 6 February 2016, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/category/section\\_113.htm](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/category/section_113.htm).
- 24 See Guy Taylor, 'Young South Koreans Fear Unification With North Would Create Economic Burden', *Washington Times*, 10 April 2013, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/apr/10/young-south-koreans-fear-unification-with-north-wo/?page=all>; 'Novel Portrays Chaos of Unified Korea', *Korea Times*, 24 April 2009, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2009/09/142\\_43780.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/art/2009/09/142_43780.html); Max Kim, 'Why South Koreans don't care about the North', NK News, 26 September 2014, <https://www.nknews.org/2014/09/why-south-koreans-dont-care-about-the-north/>.
- 25 See Avi Zenilman, 'Barbara Demick on Life in North Korea', *New Yorker*, 23 October 2009, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/barbara-demick-on-life-in-north-korea>; and David C. Kang, 'The North Korea Challenge', in Nicole M. Finnemann and Arthur N. Taylor (eds), *Navigating Turbulence in Northeast Asia: The Future of the U.S.–ROK Alliance* (Washington DC: Korea Economic Institute, 2010), pp. 106–9.
- 26 Charlie Spiering, 'While Serving as President Obama's Secretary Of State, Hillary Clinton Had a Solution to Deal With North Korea's

- Nuclear Provocations: Ignore Them', *Briefbart News*, 6 January 2016, <http://www.breitbart.com/big-government/2016/01/06/2009-hillary-clinton-compared-north-korea-small-children/>.
- <sup>27</sup> Helene Cooper, 'Bush Writes to North Korean Leader', *New York Times*, 6 December 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/06/world/asia/06cnd-korea.html>.
- <sup>28</sup> Zachary Keck, 'No, North Korea Did NOT Threaten War Over Seth Rogen Movie', *Diplomat*, 28 June 2014, <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/no-north-korea-did-not-threaten-war-over-seth-rogan-movie/>.
- <sup>29</sup> Jack Kim, 'North Korea Blames U.S. for Internet Outages, Calls Obama "Monkey"', *Reuters*, 27 December 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-cybersecurity-idUSKBN0K502920141227>.
- <sup>30</sup> Jon Herskovitz, 'North Korea Offers Rare Thanks to U.S. for Help', 8 November 2007, *Reuters*, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-korea-north-pirates-idUSSEO27491420071109>.
- <sup>31</sup> 'Kerry Reassures Saudi Arabia of "Solid Relationship"', *Al Arabiya*, 24 January 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/01/24/Kerry-reassures-Saudi-Arabia-of-solid-relationship-.html>.
- <sup>32</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry, 'Remarks With Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi', Washington DC, 23 February 2016, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2016/02/253164.htm>.
- <sup>33</sup> Cooper, 'Bush Writes to North Korean Leader'.
- <sup>34</sup> 'Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright Interview by Diane Sawyer Of ABC's "Good Morning America"', US Department of State, 30 October 2000, <http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/statements/2000/001030.html>.
- <sup>35</sup> See B.R. Myers, 'Taking North Korea at its Word', *NK News*, 13 February 2016, <https://www.nknews.org/2016/02/taking-north-korea-at-its-word/>; and B.R. Myers, 'How Pyongyang Plays the West', *Wall Street Journal*, 21 February 2008, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120352922998580335.html>.
- <sup>36</sup> Choe Sang-hun, 'South Korea Pushes Back on North's Threats', *New York Times*, 6 March 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/07/world/asia/seoul-says-north-korea-leadership-could-be-target.html>.