

# COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

## *POLICY INNOVATION MEMORANDUM NO. #54*

*Date:* November 19, 2015  
*From:* Scott A. Snyder  
*Re:* *Addressing North Korea's Nuclear Problem*

Since defecting from Six Party negotiations on denuclearization in 2008, North Korea has pursued nuclear development unchecked by international constraints. Barack Obama's administration has demanded that Pyongyang make a strategic choice to denuclearize and tried to build a regional consensus opposing North Korea's nuclear efforts, but it has been unable to halt the country's nuclear weapons development. Instead, North Korea's continued nuclear and missile development is designed to force U.S. policymakers to make an undesirable choice: either acquiesce to the reality of a nuclear North Korea or mobilize international support for the destabilization of the North Korean regime.

To stop the North Korean nuclear threat, the United States should take three steps. First, Washington should increase pressure on Pyongyang so that the regime recognizes its existential choice between survival and nuclear status. Second, the United States should pursue five-party talks (Six Party framework members minus North Korea) to develop a viable pathway for North Korea to survive and benefit from denuclearization. Such a regionally supported consensus on a route to denuclearization would seek to induce a debate inside North Korea regarding the costs and benefits of its pursuit of nuclear status. And third, the United States should encourage China and Russia to withdraw political support for and increase pressure on North Korea until the regime commits to denuclearization.

## *NORTH KOREA'S RISING INTERNATIONAL THREAT*

Since Kim Jong-un came to power in 2012, he has used nuclear weapons development—a legacy of his father's rule—as a pillar of the regime's national strategy. In addition to expanding its nuclear strike capabilities by conducting nuclear and missile tests, North Korea has also built a light-water nuclear reactor and uranium enrichment facility and restarted its five-megawatt nuclear reactor at Yongbyon, enabling the country to slowly build its nuclear fuel stockpile. Recent estimates suggest that North Korea's nuclear weapons stockpile comprises ten to sixteen nuclear weapons, and could grow rapidly by 2020 to a low-end estimate of twenty weapons and a high-end estimate of 125 weapons. In the future, North Korea might also consider selling excess nuclear fuel or devices to earn money for its economic development, which would expand the

risk of proliferation. North Korea has procured a mobile launch capability for its untested long-range (7,500 km) KN-08 missile, reducing time available to respond to a North Korean missile launch. In May, North Korea claimed to have successfully tested a submarine-launched ballistic missile and to have mastered the miniaturization technologies needed to place a nuclear warhead on a ballistic missile. Moreover, the U.S. Department of Defense's 2010 Ballistic Missile Defense Review estimates that a North Korean Taepodong-2 rocket "could reach the United States with a nuclear payload if developed as an ICBM [intercontinental ballistic missile]."

### *THE COSTS OF CONTINUED NUCLEAR DEVELOPMENT*

North Korea's nuclear development enhances its capacity to credibly threaten its neighbors and the United States with a nuclear strike, as well as to survive one. Although nuclear use would likely result in massive retaliation and the end of the regime, it complicates allied planning for conventional war, expands North Korea's capability to threaten both South Korea and Japan, and raises potential doubts about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. The North Korean leadership has historically exploited geopolitical fault lines, blackmailing patrons to ensure regime survival. Acquiescence to North Korea as a nuclear weapons state will erode the credibility of the global nonproliferation regime. North Korea signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in 1985 before it formally withdrew in 2003, when it publicly pursued nuclear weapons development. Hence, North Korea may serve as an example to other nuclear aspirants that it is possible to outwit and outwait the global commitment to nonproliferation.

Most worrisome is that North Korea under Kim Jong-un has pursued a policy of diplomatic self-isolation while ramping up vituperative accusations and threats of preemption toward its neighbors, including U.S. ally South Korea. North Korea has distanced itself from China and rejected Russian invitations to participate in a May 2015 summit in Moscow. Pyongyang's nuclear development has reportedly emerged as a stumbling block in its diplomatic relations with both Beijing and Moscow. The absence of communication channels with Kim Jong-un raises the risk of North Korean miscalculation or false assumptions regarding the likely international response to North Korea's nuclear pursuits. These signals, combined with Pyongyang's growing capability to act on threats, have increased the need for coordinated action based on the international consensus that the potentially disruptive pariah state should be reined in.

### *RECOMMENDATIONS*

To address the risk that a self-isolated and risk-tolerant North Korean leadership might follow through on its threats when it achieves these capabilities, the United States should redouble efforts to lead coordinated multilateral action to oppose North Korea's nuclear status, while still leaving a denuclearized North Korea a route for regime survival. A coordinated international effort should demonstrate that there are tangible prospects for regime survival in a denuclearized North Korea in order to prompt an internal debate among leadership in Pyongyang over the merits of its nuclear program. The United States should take the following measures to achieve this objective:

- The Obama administration should apply increased political and economic pressure on North Korea to convince its leaders that a nuclear North Korea is a dead-end option. The United States should work with its allies to expand sanctions to target businesses and banks that refuse to cease cooperation with North Korea. At the same time, the United States and its allies should emphasize to Pyongyang that expanded sanctions will be relieved if North Korea takes meaningful, concrete steps toward denuclearization, such as resuming cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) by allowing the return of international inspectors to the country. The United States should also remind North Korea that military provocations risk escalation that could lead to the country's demise.

- Alongside these sanctions, the United States and South Korea should commission the World Bank to identify sectoral trade and investment opportunities best suited to yield concrete economic benefits that would accompany North Korea's integration into the region. The objective of such an approach would be to spell out the benefits to North Korea of denuclearization, integration, and peaceful coexistence in conjunction with strengthened sanctions.
- The U.S. and South Korean presidents should leverage an emerging debate within the Chinese government about North Korea's strategic value and press Chinese President Xi Jinping to strengthen Chinese sanctions on North Korea, even at the risk of inducing North Korean instability. To convince Beijing to take such a course, U.S. President Barack Obama and South Korean President Park Geun-hye should pledge that no U.S. troops would be permanently stationed north of the 38th parallel in the event of a North Korean collapse. At the same time, the two leaders should note that Korean reunification would allow for the reduction in the overall number of U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula while affirming that the U.S.-South Korea alliance will remain strong even after unification.
- In return for Chinese cooperation to enhance pressure on North Korea, the United States should respond to China's long-standing calls for resumption of North Korea-focused diplomacy by working with the other five parties in the Six Party Talks to develop detailed measures to peacefully pursue a transformation of the North Korean regime. The parties should recognize that forcible regime change would be the only remaining means to achieve denuclearization if North Korea fails to accept these measures. The parties would spell out a detailed pathway to peaceful coexistence, denuclearization, diplomatic normalization, and improved internal governance. The purpose of this process would be twofold: to establish a coordination mechanism that enables the United States and its allies to address Chinese and Russian geopolitical concerns surrounding North Korea in exchange for increased pressure on the North Korean leadership, and to induce a policy debate among North Korean leaders regarding the value of its nuclear program.
- The United States and South Korea should strengthen deterrence against North Korean military provocations at the demilitarized zone and the Northern Limit Line by coming up with a detailed escalation ladder comprising tailored responses to match different types and levels of provocations. U.S. and South Korean forces should also design a clear protocol for officers on the ground to implement these responses swiftly, in consultation with senior officials. To counter North Korea's growing missile capabilities, the United States and South Korea should obtain appropriate defense mechanisms such as the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD).

## CONCLUSION

A U.S. strategy designed to induce debates within the North Korean leadership over its current course represents possibly the last chance to redirect a self-isolated North Korea toward peaceful coexistence. If the West acquiesces to North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, the scope and magnitude of North Korean blackmail efforts toward its neighbors will likely intensify; alternatively, it will be necessary to use military force to bring about regime change in order to achieve denuclearization. Given China's interests in stability on the Korean peninsula and its growing reticence to support the regime under Kim Jong-un, pursuit of an internationally coordinated approach that spells out conditions for North Korean regime survival and economic stability should be attractive to Beijing. The risk that increased economic pressure on Pyongyang will induce instability or backlash is relatively small compared to the costs of military conflict, consequences of North Korean nuclear proliferation, or additional military preparations necessary to contain North Korea's nuclear capabilities. The risk of North Korea's increased proliferation by 2020 and its efforts to develop the capability to mount a direct nuclear strike on the United States means that failure to address these developments now will likely require the next U.S. administration to choose among far less palatable options in the face of an even more serious North Korean crisis.

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