



A Nuclear North Korea and Strategic Stability in East Asia

By Jo Inge Bekkevold and Ian Bowers

North Korea continues to develop ballistic missiles and nuclear weapons despite international condemnation and increasing political and economic isolation. While war is unlikely, expectations of denuclearisation seem optimistic. Ongoing tensions will likely have substantial short-term and long-term regional strategic implications.

Take aways

- **North Korea is and should be assessed as a rational actor.**
- **North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear programmes will likely continue despite international pressure.**
- **North Korea's actions are exposing weaknesses and driving alterations in regional security policies.**
- **China's influence over North Korea is weaker than commonly understood.**
- **The potential for instability arising from nuclear proliferation and the spread of missile defence systems is rising.**

NORTH KOREAN RATIONALITY AND INTENTIONS

Much of the international debate surrounding North Korea maintains a hopeful narrative that peaceful denuclearisation is possible. However, North Korea has invested substantial economic, political and reputational resources into their nuclear weapons programme. If it is not already, North Korea will become a nuclear power. It is this reality that the international community will need to accept, and the remaining question is not if North Korea develops the capability to strike the US, but when.

While it is impossible to fully assess North Korea's intentions regarding the development and use of such capabilities we can make some educated guesses. It should be understood that contrary to how North Korea is often portrayed, there is little evidence to suggest that the Kim regime is irrational and much evidence to demonstrate that there are rational, strategic motives behind their actions.



North Korean state media argues that North Korea is seeking military equilibrium with the United States. This suggests that their primary objective is securing the country from external influence. Namely, strengthening their deterrence capability to prevent the US and possibly in the future, China, from invading the country or attempting to overthrow the regime.

There are also likely to be secondary objectives which are not mutually exclusive. These include weakening or decoupling US alliances in the region, establishing international respect, and internal signalling of regime power. Nuclear weapons could also be used as source of strength in future negotiations. North Korea has stated that talks may be possible once their nuclear capability has been fully developed. This highlights Pyongyang's perception that their current negotiating position is weak and their view that nuclear weapons are a tool to offset their inherent power asymmetry with the US and South Korea.

DETERRENCE AND STABILITY ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

Despite the continued development of a nuclear capability, the hard reality is that the strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula has not yet changed significantly. The conventional deterrent stalemate which has secured the peace on the peninsula since the end of the Korean War, still serves to significantly limit the actions of all of the involved actors.

While North Korea is a weak state relative to its opponents, it possesses large numbers of conventional weapons pre-deployed to target South Korea and maintains a significant short and medium range missile programme which can strike targets in Japan. Consequently, North Korea can quickly inflict substantial casualties in large metropolitan areas in both South Korea and Japan before US and other forces can stop them. This constrains US actions as they cannot guarantee that military action would not result in catastrophic damage to their regional allies.

At the same time, the US and South Korean militaries are superior in virtually every metric (with the exception of personnel numbers) and would be almost certainly capable of invading and or destroying the regime. This prevents Pyongyang from escalating military provocations to the point of war, as the inevitable outcome would be their defeat.

This largely explains the historical US reluctance to undertake military action. It also explains Washington's reliance on sanctions, the use of its military to signal its capabilities and resolve and its emphasis on the role of China. The success of these efforts has so far been limited but the strategic reality means that for now such actions are all they have. Essentially, deterrence, no matter how sub-optimal, has worked, and it is for this reason that most in the analyst community regard the possibility of war to be extremely low. In essence there is no good outcome for anybody if a conflict begins. This is true in a conventional context and will most likely be true in a nuclear one.

However, despite the theoretical and historical stabilising effects of deterrence, a North Korean nuclear capability which can threaten the US raises uncomfortable questions for political and military leaders in Washington. Namely, can the US trust that deterrence will continue to work and prevent Kim Jong-un from using his new found nuclear capability?

Publically, the Trump administration seems to be split on the level of security provided by deterrence due to misgivings over Kim Jong-un's rationality. If the determination is made that North Korea is not deterable, the US may seek to initiate military action despite the potentially catastrophic consequences. However, it is worth noting that without prior congressional approval, President Donald Trump's legal authority to strike North Korea is limited. Force can only be used if a direct threat to the US or its allies is detected. This would seemingly constrain the administration's legal options to preventively attack North Korea without evidence of an imminent direct threat.



ESCALATION AND RHETORIC: TRUMP VS KIM

A more likely scenario for war breaking out is conflict arising from miscalculation and consequent uncontrolled escalation. This problem has been exacerbated by the rhetoric that has emanated from both the US and North Korea. Heightened public and political perceptions regarding the level of threat may lead to a dangerous misinterpretation of intentions by all sides.

It should be emphasised that rhetorical threats made by North Korea are nothing new. The threat to destroy a US city or attack the island of Guam must be viewed within the context that the North Korean government has previously and consistently made such threats in relation to Seoul and other cities in the region but has never followed through. This rhetoric is often used to signal opposition to international sanctions, military exercises or other actions that North Korea deems detrimental to its interests. Notwithstanding the fact that such threats have been largely ignored in Seoul and Tokyo, North Korea's nuclear programme gives such rhetoric increased salience in Washington.

The verbal back and forth between Donald Trump and Kim Jong-un has raised tensions and increased the potential for further hostility on both sides. This is a new strategic variable as the US president's actions are a reverse of decades of US foreign policy practice, which has historically sought to dampen down tensions in the region. It is impossible to know what will be the end game of this new type of international communication but it is likely to be unhelpful and as with Pyongyang's threats, can only serve to worsen the situation.

REGIONAL RESPONSES: SOUTH KOREA, JAPAN, AND RUSSIA

North Korea's nuclear programme is exposing the future and frailty of security policies across Northeast Asia. South Korea is struggling to cope with the effects of North Korea's actions. While it has hardened its military signalling efforts by pursuing a

more offensively oriented defence posture and participating in increased military exercises, the South Korean government seems somewhat uncomfortable with this path.

The current administration, led by President Moon Jae-in, insists that it will never accept a nuclear North Korea. However, he came to power advocating a peaceful solution and promising dialogue with North Korea. These efforts have largely failed and are one of the many sources of division between Seoul and Washington.

South Korea is ultimately afraid of being taken out of the decision making loop, it is fearful of US action without consultation and therefore in an effort to keep the US onside is now broadly supporting their hard-line approach. It is difficult to see a scenario, short of unilateral US action, where Seoul will break with Washington's policies. And while the US would most likely need South Korean support in the case of sustained military action, Seoul has struggled to ensure its voice is being heard.

In Japan, Prime Minister Shinzō Abe has positioned himself as one of President Trump's closest allies, and it is highly likely that Japan will continue to mirror the US approach to the North Korean issue. They have imposed and supported harsh economic sanctions and do not currently advocate dialogue with North Korea.

Prime Minister Abe used the threat posed by North Korea to both bolster his party's electoral support during the recent Japanese elections and strengthen his argument to normalise the country's security posture by rewriting the constitution. While he may still struggle to accomplish this goal, it is almost certain that Japan will increase its missile defence capability, and possibly use the North Korea threat to justify lifting their self-imposed ban on offensive weaponry. An important knock-on effect of the North Korea threat has been closer Japan–South Korea security ties. This relationship is often strained due to numerous historical issues between the two countries, and it remains to be seen if this cooperation can be sustained after the current crisis ends.



Russia's involvement in this situation is somewhat unclear. Russia's post-Cold War relative weakness in the Asia-Pacific region has resulted in its marginalisation regarding dealing with North Korea. Currently, Moscow supports the Chinese position regarding the futility of sanctions. Putin has strongly advocated a return to negotiations and believes that an ever-strengthening sanctions regime may result in conflict.

It is important to note that North Korea seems to be in increasingly close contact with Russia. Therefore, Putin's role in a peaceful solution may be more central than is currently understood, as Pyongyang might have more trust in dealing with Moscow than in dealing with Beijing. On the other hand, if Russia takes on a role in North Korea that goes against Chinese interests, Beijing may push back as China now has emerged as the dominant player in Sino-Russian relations.

CHINA'S NORTH KOREA POLICY

Since the end of the Cold War, China has been North Korea's most important ally and trading partner. Nevertheless, the US and the international community at large have overestimated Beijing's ability to influence the thinking and behaviour of Pyongyang. We argue that there are five factors that indicate China's weakened leverage and influence over North Korea.

1. Despite trying for over thirty years, China has largely failed to persuade North Korea as to the benefits of following Beijing's socialist market model.
2. China's strong condemnation of all six North Korea's nuclear tests has failed to alter or reverse Pyongyang's weapons development programme.
3. In reality, the relationship between Beijing and Pyongyang is poor with diplomatic dialogues and high-level political visits being substantially reduced. [Xi Jinping has distanced himself from Kim Jong-un and despite a recent exchange of regards between the two leaders](#), a substantial thawing of relations seems unlikely over the short term.
4. The end of the Cold War was a strategic shock to Pyongyang, and China's normalisation of relations with South Korea in 1992 another. China's economic and military rise, as well as Beijing's embrace of globalisation, raises questions in Pyongyang over the future of the alliance which was founded on ideological alignment.
5. North Korea's strategic importance to China has diminished. North Korea's role as a buffer state has been a strategic asset for China, but Pyongyang's nuclear policy of late has made the country more of a liability than an asset for Beijing as China's interests now extend far beyond their immediate periphery.

Although China's influence over North Korea is diminishing, China still plays an important role in managing the current crisis and determining the future of the Korean Peninsula. China has consistently favoured diplomacy and dialogue to solve the North Korean nuclear situation. Beijing played an important role in the Six Party Talks, and has called for this dialogue to be restarted. North Korea, however, seems to be more willing to talk to the United States or Russia rather than to China.

Since the first North Korean nuclear test in 2006, China has supported sanctions against North Korea, but has often tried to reduce their impact in order to secure stability across the border. China has long experience of balancing its North Korea policy; adjusting to US pressure (to strengthen the sanctions regime) and at the same time pursuing its own agenda. China did this with great success related to Iran, and follows the same policy with regard to North Korea. For instance, oil exports to North Korea give China influence, but Beijing would not want to give away this bargaining chip easily. Furthermore, as a result of China's growing power and influence in international affairs, China is less willing to give in to US pressure today than only a few years ago.

China currently opposes military intervention. Nevertheless, Beijing may agree to



military action which would result in a unified Korea, with Seoul as the capital, if US troops subsequently withdrew from the peninsula. However, this scenario would require a level of strategic trust between Washington and Beijing that does not currently exist.

The most dangerous situation would be a unilateral US strike without consulting Beijing. If this occurs, it is possible that Beijing would intervene on the side of North Korea. China's support of North Korea would most likely cement the current divisions on the peninsula. Further, the heightened potential for conflict between the US and China would send geopolitical and economic shockwaves across the world.

KNOCK-ON EFFECTS

If the situation on the Korean Peninsula does not escalate into war and the subsequent collapse of the Kim regime, we will likely see a number of strategic knock-on effects arising from North Korea's actions.

It is evident that over the short to medium term there will be a substantial increase in missile defences (MD) in the region. On the surface, such developments may seem logical but there are some potential strategic implications which could cause concern. Japan has now committed to bolstering its existing capabilities with the US-built Aegis ashore system. South Korea is currently developing a range of systems under the name Korean Air and Missile Defense (KAMD). Seoul has also permitted the US to deploy the THAAD missile defence system in the south of the country to protect US military bases and the strategically vital port of Busan.

China strongly objects to the increased missile defences in the region, particularly if they are networked to US defence systems. [Although Seoul has recently said it has no plans to network its MD system with the US and Japan](#), this could change in the future and would provoke a strong diplomatic and economic reaction from Beijing. Further, if future MD systems gain in effectiveness, China could see this as a threat to their own offensive capabilities and could build-up their short and intermediate range missiles capacity in response.

Similarly, North Korea will not be static in their reaction to being encircled by missile defence systems. There is for instance increasing evidence that North Korea is developing a submarine launched ballistic missile capability which could render extant missile defences useless. Designing around MD systems is a rational action by Pyongyang considering the effort they have made to develop nuclear weapons.

Beyond missile defence, there is a potential for nuclear proliferation in the region. Although the South Korean government has ruled out developing an independent nuclear capability, public and political support for such a move is growing.

There is a dual explanation for this trend. The first is that traditionally the South Korean defence community has always wanted to match the capabilities of North Korea and has largely succeeded in doing so. Not having nuclear weapons is perceived by some as a weakness. Secondly, many in South Korea question the reliability of the US due to concerns regarding the US' deterrent commitment and the stability of the Trump administration. Some in Seoul are worried that if North Korea can target a US city with a nuclear weapon, Washington would be reluctant to act to protect South Korea.

While the US nuclear umbrella should be currently judged as solid, defence hawks in Seoul argue that a nuclear capability would alleviate these concerns. If South Korea does make the step to develop its own nuclear capability it would inevitably lead to Japan developing one also.

While there is some academic debate regarding the positive and negative outcomes of proliferation, such actions would fundamentally alter the political picture of East Asia by reducing the strategic importance of the US alliance structure and providing the powers of Northeast Asia with a stronger independent defence capability. If Japan develops a nuclear capability, this opens the door for a rethink of the US forward posture in the region. This might significantly influence other strategic issues such as the US commitment to Taiwan.



A DIFFICULT FUTURE FOR THE KOREAN PENINSULA

As this paper has stated, while war cannot be and should not be discounted, the most likely outcome of the current crisis is a deployable North Korean nuclear capability despite the continued international action. This leaves the international community with two fundamental but unpalatable choices; isolate or engage with Pyongyang.

If we isolate North Korea, this would be in the hope that economic and political pressure would force a change in their nuclear policy. This would most likely be a long-term endeavour and could in the meantime lead to extreme tension on the peninsula or even an uncontrolled regime collapse with the possibility of substantial consequent instability in a nuclear-armed state. Further, a cash-strapped North Korea could seek to sell their nuclear technology to other rogue regimes or terrorist actors thereby exacerbating the existing problem.

The other option, engagement, would involve a full reversal of US strategic thinking which may be difficult considering the paralytic state of US congressional politics and the unpalatable strategic compromises that would be required. Pyongyang would most likely want significant concessions over the long term including a peace treaty with the US, economic assistance and a drawdown of US forces on the peninsula. Such terms may be impossible to meet given the current political climate.



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Editor: Anna Therese Klingstedt

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Top picture on the front page: An Air Force B-1B Lancer joins up with a South Korean air force F-15 during a 10-hour mission from Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, into Japanese airspace and over the Korean Peninsula, 30 July, 2017
Photo: US Air Force, Kamaile Casillas.

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