



From “Engagement” to Threat Reduction: Moving Toward a North Korea Strategy That Works

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

I am honored to be invited to discuss the gathering threat North Korea poses to the United States, our allies, and the international community—and what we can respond to it.

In my testimony I wish to make five main points:

First: North Korea is embarked on a steady, methodical, and relentless journey, whose intended endpoint is a credible capacity to hit New York and Washington with nuclear weapons.

Second: America’s policy for nuclear nonproliferation in North Korea is a prolonged, and thoroughly bipartisan, failure.

Third: Our North Korea policy is a failure because our public and our leaders do not understand our adversary and his intentions.

Fourth: We cannot hope to cope successfully with the North Korean threat until we do.

Fifth: Any successful effort to make the North Korean threat smaller will require not just better understanding of this adversary, but also a coherent and sustained strategy of threat reduction informed by such an understanding.

I

Our seemingly unending inability to fathom Pyongyang’s true objectives, and our attendant proclivity for being taken by surprise over and over again by North Korean actions, is not just a matter of succumbing to Pyongyang’s strategic deceptions, assiduous as those efforts may be.

The trouble, rather, is that even our top foreign policy experts and our most sophisticated diplomatists are creatures of our own cultural heritage and intellectual environment. We Americans are, so to speak, children of the Enlightenment, steeped in the precepts of our highly globalized era. Which is to say: we have absolutely no common point of reference with the worldview, or moral compass, or first premises of

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the closed-society decision makers who control the North Korean state. Americans' first instincts are to misunderstand practically everything the North Korean state is really about.

The DPRK is a project pulled by tides and shaped by sensibilities all but forgotten to the contemporary West. North Korea is a hereditary Asian dynasty (currently on its third Kim)—but one maintained by Marxist-Leninist police state powers unimaginable to earlier epochs of Asian despots and supported by a recently invented and quasi-religious ideology.²

And exactly what is that ideology? Along with its notorious variant of emperor worship, “Juche thought” also extols an essentially messianic—and unapologetically racialist—vision of history: one in which the long-abused Korean people finally assume their rightful place in the universe by standing up against the foreign races that have long oppressed them, at last reuniting the entire Korean peninsula under an independent socialist state (i.e., the DPRK). Although highly redacted in broadcasts aimed at foreign ears, this call for reunification of the *mijnok* (race), and for retribution against the enemy races or powers (starting with America and Japan), constantly reverberates within North Korea, sounded by the regime’s highest authorities.³

This is where its nuclear weapons program fits into North Korea’s designs. In Pyongyang’s thinking, the indispensable instrument for achieving the DPRK’s grand historical ambitions must be a supremely powerful military: more specifically, one possessed of a nuclear arsenal that can imperil and break the foreign enemies who protect and prop up what Pyongyang regards as the vile puppet state in the South, so that the DPRK may consummate its unconditional unification and give birth to its envisioned earthly Korean-race utopia.

In earlier decades, Pyongyang might have seen multiple paths to this Elysium, but with the collapse of the Soviet empire, the long-term decline of the DPRK’s industrial infrastructure, and the gradually accumulating evidence that South Korea was not going to succumb on its own to the revolutionary upheaval Pyongyang so dearly wished of it, the nuclear option increasingly looks to be the one and only trail by which to reach the Promised Kingdom.

II

Like all other states, the North Korean regime relies at times upon diplomacy to pursue its official aims—thus, for example, the abiding call for a “peace treaty” with the US to bring a formal end to the Korean War (since 1953 only an armistice, or cease-fire, has been in place).⁴ Yet strangely few foreign policy specialists seem to understand why Pyongyang is so fixated on this particular document. If the US agreed to a peace treaty, Pyongyang insists, it would then also have to agree to a withdrawal of its forces from South Korea and to a dissolution of its military alliance with Seoul—for the danger of “external armed attack” upon which the Seoul-Washington Mutual Defense Treaty is predicated would by definition no longer exist. If all this could come to pass, North Korea would win a huge victory without firing a shot.

But with apologies to Clausewitz, diplomacy is merely war by other means for Pyongyang. And for the dynasty the onetime anti-Japanese guerrilla fighter Kim Il Sung established, policy and war are inseparable—this is why the DPRK is the most highly militarized society on the planet. This is also why

² Cf. Nicholas Eberstadt, *The End of North Korea* (AEI Press, 1999).

³ For penetrating discussions of North Korea’s ideology, see B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race* (Melville House, 2010) and B. R. Myers, *North Korea’s Juche Myth* (Sthele Publishers, 2015).

⁴ For background on North Korean negotiating behavior, see Chuck Down’s classic study *Over The Line: North Korean: Negotiating Strategy* (AEI Press, 1998). Although published nearly two decades ago, its depiction of the DPRK’s approach is still absolutely up to date.

the answer to the unification question that so preoccupies North Korean leadership appears to entail meticulous and incessant preparations, already underway for decades, to fight and win a limited nuclear war against the United States.

To almost any Western reader, the notion that North Korea might actually be planning to stare down the USA in some future nuclear face-off will sound preposterous, if not outright insane. And indeed it does—to us. Yet remember: as we already know from press reports, North Korea has been diligently working on everything that would actually be required for such a confrontation: miniaturization of nuclear warheads, intercontinental ballistic missiles, and even cyberwarfare (per the Sony hacking episode). Note further that while North Korean leadership may be highly tolerant of casualties (on the part of others, that is) it most assuredly is not suicidal itself. Quite the contrary: its acute interest in self-preservation is demonstrated *prima facie* by the fact of its very survival, over 25 years after the demise of the USSR and Eastern European socialism. It would be unwise of us to presume that only one of the two forces arrayed along the DMZ is capable of thinking about what it would take to deter the other in a time of crisis on the Peninsula.

III

At this juncture, as so often in the past, serious people around the world are calling to “bring North Korea back to the table” to try to settle the DPRK nuclear issue. However, seeing the DPRK for what it is, rather than what we would like it to be, should oblige us to recognize two highly unpleasant truths.

First, the real existing North Korean leadership (as opposed to the imaginary version some Westerners would like to negotiate with) will never willingly give up their nuclear option. Never. Acquiescing in denuclearization would be tantamount to abandoning the sacred mission of Korean unification: which is to say, disavowing the DPRK’s *raison d’être*. Thus submitting to foreign demands to denuclearize could well mean more than humiliation and disgrace for North Korean leadership: it could mean delegitimization and destabilization for the regime as well.

Second, international entreaties—summitry, conferencing, bargaining, and all the rest—can never succeed in convincing the DPRK to relinquish its nuclear program. Sovereign governments simply do not trade away their vital national interests.

Now, this is not to say that Western nonproliferation parlays with the DPRK have no results to show at all. We know they can result in blandishments (as per North Korea’s custom of requiring “money for meetings”) and in resource transfers (as with the Clinton Administration’s Agreed Framework shipments of heavy fuel oil). They can provide external diplomatic cover for the DPRK the nuclear program, as was in effect afforded under the intermittent 2003–07 Six Party Talks in Beijing. They can even lure North Korea’s interlocutors into unexpected unilateral concessions, as witnessed in the final years of the George W. Bush Administration, when Washington unfroze illicit North Korean overseas funds and removed Pyongyang from the list of State Sponsors of Terrorism in misbegotten hope of a “breakthrough.” *The one thing “engagement” can never produce, however, is North Korean denuclearization.*

Note, too, that in every realm of international transaction, from commercial contracts to security accords, the record shows that, even when Western bargainers think they have made a deal with North Korea, the DPRK side never has any compunction about violating the understanding if that should serve purposes of state. This may outrage us, but it should not surprise us: for under North Korea’s moral code, if there should be any advantage to gain from cheating against foreigners, then *not* cheating would be patently unpatriotic, a disloyal blow against the Motherland.

Yes, things would be so easier for us if North Korea would simply agree to the deal *we want them to*

accept. But if we put the wishful thinking to one side, a clear-eyed view of the North Korea *problematik* must be resigned to the grim reality that diplomacy can only have a very limited and highly specific role in addressing our gathering North Korean problem.

Diplomacy must have some role because it is barbaric not to talk with one's opponent—because communication can help both sides avoid needless and potentially disastrous miscalculations. But the notion of a “grand bargain” with Pyongyang—in which all mutual concerns are simultaneously settled, as the “Perry Process” conjectured back in the 1990s and others have subsequently prophesied—is nothing but a dream.

It is time to set aside the illusion of “engaging” North Korea to effect nonproliferation and to embrace instead a paradigm that has a chance of actually working: call this “threat reduction.” Through a coherent long-term strategy, working with allies and others but also acting unilaterally, the United States can blunt, then mitigate, and eventually help eliminate the killing force of the North Korean state.

IV

In broad outline, North Korean threat reduction requires progressive development of more effective defenses against the DPRK’s means of destruction while simultaneously weakening Pyongyang’s capabilities for supporting both conventional and strategic offense.

A more effective defense against the North Korean threat would consist mainly, though not entirely, of military measures. Restoring recently sacrificed US capabilities would be essential. Likewise more and better missile defense: THAAD systems (and more) for South Korea and Japan, and moving forward on missile defense in earnest for the USA. It would be incumbent on South Korea to reduce its own population’s exposure to North Korean death from the skies through military modernization and civil defense. DPRK would be served notice that 60 years of zero-consequence rules of engagement for allied forces in the face of North Korean “provocations” on the Peninsula had just come to an end. But diplomacy would count here as well: most importantly, alliance strengthening throughout Asia in general and repairing the currently frayed ROK-Japan relationship in particular. Today’s ongoing bickering between Seoul and Tokyo reeks of interwar politics at its worst; leaders who want to live in a postwar order need to rise above such petty grievances.

As for weakening the DPRK’s military economy, the foundation for all its offensive capabilities: reinvigorating current counterproliferation efforts, such as PSI and MCTR, is a good place to start. But only a start. Given the “military first” disposition of the North Korean economy,⁵ restricting its overall potential is necessary as well. South Korea’s subsidized trade with the North, for example, should come to an end. And put Pyongyang back on the State Sponsors of Terrorism list—it never should have been taken off. Sanctions with a genuine bite should be implemented—the dysfunctional DPRK economy is uniquely susceptible to these, and amazing as this may sound, the current sanctions strictures for North Korea have long been weaker than, say, those enforced until recently for Iran. (We can enforce such sanctions unilaterally, by the way.) And not least important: revive efforts like the Illicit Activities

⁵ Students of North Korean affairs will note that the concept of “Military First Politics” (in Korean, *Songun Chongchi*) arose under the rule of “Dear Leader” Kim Jong Il, who died in 2011, and that “Dear Respected” Kim Jong Un has promoted his own “Byungjin Line” (parallel development of military and civilian economies) since his father’s death. This is true—but there should be no doubt that military first politics remains absolutely current and continues to be extolled constantly in North Korea’s state media. Between January 2012 and January 2017, items in Pyongyang’s official Korea Central News Agency (KCNA) mentioned “*songun*” over 4,700 times. Derived from NK NEWS Database of North Korean Propaganda, <http://www.nk-news.net/search.php?newQueryButton=%3C%3C+New+Query> (January 30, 2017).

Initiative, the brief, but tremendously successful Dubya-era task force for tracking and freezing North Korea's dirty money abroad.

Then there is the China question. Received wisdom in some quarters notwithstanding, it is by no means impossible for America and her allies to pressure the DPRK if China does not cooperate (see previous paragraph). That said: China has been allowed to play a double game with North Korea for far too long, and it is time for Beijing to pay a penalty for all its support for the most odious regime on the planet today. We can begin by exacting it in diplomatic venues all around the world, starting with the UN. NGOs can train a spotlight on Beijing's complicity in the North Korean regime's crimes. And international humanitarian action should shame China into opening a safe transit route to the free world for North Korean refugees attempting to escape their oppressors.

If North Korean subjects enjoyed greater human rights, the DPRK killing machine could not possibly operate as effectively as it does today.⁶ Activists will always worry about the instrumentalization of human rights concerns for other policy ends—and rightly so. Today and for the foreseeable future, however, there is no contradiction between the objectives of human rights promotion and nonproliferation in the DPRK. North Korea's human rights situation is vastly worse than in *apartheid* South Africa—why hasn't the international community (and South Korean civil society) found its voice on this real-time, ongoing tragedy? The Office of the UN High Commissioner on Human Rights has already prepared a comprehensive Commission of Inquiry on the situation in the DPRK⁷: let governments of conscience seek international criminal accountability for North Korea's leadership.

Many in the West talk of “isolating” North Korea as if this were an objective in its own right. But a serious DPRK threat reduction strategy would not do so. The North Korean regime depends on isolation from the outside world to maintain its grip and conduct untrammeled pursuit of its international objectives. The regime is deadly afraid of what it terms “ideological and cultural poisoning”: what we could call foreign media, international information, cultural exchanges, and the like. We should be saying: bring on the “poisoning”! The more external contact with that enslaved population, the better. We should even consider technical training abroad for North Koreans in accounting, law, economics, and the like—because some day, in a better future, that nation will need a cadre of Western-style technocrats for rejoining our world.

This brings us to the last agenda item: preparing for a successful reunification in a post-DPRK peninsula. The Kim regime *is* the North Korean nuclear threat; that threat will not end until the DPRK disappears. We cannot tell when, or how, this will occur. But it is not too soon to commence the wide-ranging and painstaking international planning and preparations that will facilitate divided Korea's long-awaited reunion as a single peninsula, free and whole.

⁶ For a detailed exposition of the North Korean state's apparatus of human rights denial, see two seminal reports by Robert M. Collins for the US Committee on Human Rights in North Korea: *Marked for Life: Songbun, North Korea's Social Classification System* (HRNK 2012), https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/HRNK_Songbun_Web.pdf (January 30, 2017), and *Pyongyang Republic: North Korea's Capital of Human Rights Denial* (HRNK 2016), https://www.hrnk.org/uploads/pdfs/Collins_PyongyangRepublic_FINAL_WEB.pdf (January 30, 2017).

⁷ UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Report of the Detailed Findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea,” A/HRC/25/CRP.1, February 2, 2014, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/CoIDPRK/Pages/CommissionInquiryonHRinDPRK.aspx> (January 30, 2017).