

North Korea and Nuclear Weapons

by Robert Oppenheim,
University of Texas at Austin

What does North Korea want, and why has it been developing missiles and nuclear weapons?

Confrontations between the United States and North Korea over the latter's development of nuclear technologies date to the early 1990s. At first, it seemed likely that North Korea would be willing to barter away its problematic nuclear facilities and materials in exchange for some mix of economic aid, assistance in developing energy facilities, and diplomatic recognition. After 2001, however, U.S. policy became increasingly confrontational, and North Korea eventually responded with its first nuclear test in 2006 and a series of tests of increasing sophistication since then. It is possible that North Korean leadership were determined to develop nuclear weapons all along; it is possible also that growing outside hostility and U.S. unilateralism changed the priorities of North Korean leaders or allowed a hard-line policy faction to win out.

There are both historic and recent reasons why possession of a nuclear deterrent may appeal to North Korea. During the Korean War (1950-53), the United States established air superiority over the entire peninsula. U.S. bombers dropped a greater tonnage of bombs on North Korea than they had throughout the entire Pacific theater of World War II, and many North Korean cities were reduced to rubble. Moreover, the United States on several instances publicly contemplated the use of its own nuclear weapons during the war, a threat to which neither North Korea nor its main ally in the war, China, had any means of response. After the war, the United States maintained nuclear weapons in South Korea until 1991, and of course still possesses the ability to use nuclear weapons against the North. A favored U.S. response at various moments of confrontation has been to fly nuclear-capable

bombers on vectors toward North Korea, turning them away at the last minute. North Korea has been amply reminded what nuclear disparity means.

Yet there are also post-2001 touchstones that have been noted by North Korea in various public statements. The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 had Iraq's alleged pursuit of weapons of mass destruction as one of its stated reasons; had Iraq actually possessed such weapons, North Korea reasons, the invasion would have been less likely. In the same year, Libya announced it would voluntarily give up its nuclear weapons program, which for a time improved relations with the United States and European powers. Yet Libya's action did not prevent these same powers from intervening against the government of Muammar Gaddafi following the Arab Spring uprisings, and Gaddafi died a gruesome death at the hands of rebels, a point surely not lost on Kim Jong-un. Meanwhile, India and Pakistan tested nuclear weapons in the late 1990s and, after enduring a period of international condemnation and sanctions, eventually had the existence of their nuclear arsenals accepted by the international community and the sanctions lifted. In the medium term, North Korea may be aiming for this "Pakistan exception."

What options are there for eliminating North Korea's nuclear weapons or slowing their development?

Most analyses suggest that preemptive U.S. military action against North Korea would be very costly, and could easily result in tens or hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths in South Korea, Japan, and possibly beyond, along with hundreds of billions of dollars of damage. Long before its development of nuclear weapons, North Korea had stationed hundreds of artillery pieces in range of the densely populated South Korean capital of Seoul. North Korean development of

missile and nuclear warhead technologies in recent years has brought an increased capacity to damage the rest of South Korea, Japan, and U.S. locations such as Guam. Moreover, because North Korean facilities are dispersed and many are underground, it is unclear whether a U.S. strike would be able to eliminate North Korean nuclear weapons entirely.

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There is the option of exerting pressure through economic sanctions against North Korea, a path the United States has pursued with new vigor recently. Sanctions are a more appealing option than war, yet it is worth being conservative in assessing their potential to effect the denuclearization of North Korea for several reasons. First, North Korea's main trading partner and historic ally, China, has been reluctant to impose drastic sanctions in the past. While China agreed to stop importing North Korean coal early in 2017, for instance, overall trade between the two countries increased in the first half of the year. Chinese officials and the Chinese public increasingly find Kim Jong-un worryingly provocative, but China wishes neither a reunified Korean peninsula under the control of Seoul (and possibly still stationing U.S. troops) nor an increased flow of North Korean refugees into its border regions, likely consequences of either a North Korean state collapse or even extreme economic privation. Second, North Korea has been under a variety of sanctions for years, and even before that promoted an ideological commitment to self-sufficiency as an aspect of its Juche philosophy, with the result that its domestic economy is relatively insulated from outside shocks. To the extent that broad economic sanctions might inflict pain, they are likely to do so to North Korea's poorer, economically and politically disadvantaged social groups, who already suffer greatly, long before they have an impact on the ruling elite. Meanwhile, sanctions may actually increase domestic support for the North Korean regime, insofar as they play into a nationalistic nar-

rative that North Korea confronts a hostile world. Third, the most aggressive sanctions, such as the complete halt of petroleum imports from China that the United States has sought, have the potential to precipitate rather than prevent war. It is worth recalling that the U.S. embargo of oil exports to Japan in August 1941 in response to Japanese imperialist expansion gave Japan a closing window for military action.

Then there is the possibility of negotiating with North Korea. Throughout the Obama and Trump administrations, the United States has more or less taken the position that it will reenter talks with North Korea only if that country agrees in advance that the goal of such talks is the elimination of its nuclear programs; North Korea has been unwilling unilaterally to concede its leverage in this way. A more open-ended dialogue, undertaken on the expectation of mutual concessions, has some potential of limited success. China has proposed, and the United States has so far rejected, an initial trade through which North Korea would freeze its ongoing nuclear and missile tests in exchange for the suspension of periodic U.S.-South Korean military exercises that the North views as dress rehearsals for war. There are other items that North Korea has sought in the past: economic aid, reopened trade, as well as "softer" provisions such as an improved diplomatic relationship with the United States, all of which could be proffered in the course of discussions. Some have even suggested that the United States should unilaterally offer to sign a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War—a "concession" but ostensibly one of benefit to all—or otherwise make some low-cost, symbolic gesture as a way to jumpstart talks. At this point, it is probably unreasonable to expect that negotiations will result in the complete elimination of North Korean nuclear weapons, but an end state in which North Korea retains some limited arsenal but is not continuing to amass fissile material and develop its nuclear capacities through testing is vastly superior to what prevails now.

Should none of these solutions succeed, there remains the default of mutual deterrence of the sort that prevented nuclear exchanges between the United States, USSR, and China during the Cold War. North Korea may already have or may soon

acquire the capacity to deliver a nuclear weapon to the mainland United States, but, of course, the United States has had the capacity to deliver a nuclear weapon to North Korea for over half a century. Nuclear terror on the Korean peninsula is not new; it is our relationship to it that is new.

But hasn't North Korea cheated on agreements in the past?

The idea that North Korea invariably cheats on agreements stems largely from the aftermath of the 1994 Agreed Framework, through which North Korea agreed to mothball and then gradually dismantle its plutonium-producing Yongbyon reactor in exchange for fuel oil, diplomatic overtures, and international provision of an alternative reactor, of a design less prone to proliferation, that would have required enriched uranium fuel. In the late 1990s, North Korea was discovered to be undertaking uranium enrichment, a topic not addressed directly in the Agreed Framework. While highly-enriched uranium suitable for nuclear warheads is one possible outcome of such activity, some argued that North Korea could also have been seeking the capacity to produce its own fuel for the replacement reactor, which otherwise would have had to be supplied by the international community. Moreover, many of the promises the United States made in the 1994 agreement were themselves delayed or not fully delivered. In 2002, rather than pursuing additional negotiations to bring North Korea's uranium enrichment under control (as many U.S. officials recommended), the George W. Bush administration used it as a justification to halt U.S. participation in the Agreed Framework. This took place amidst a context of the administration's disregard of constraining international agreements and a post-2001 hostility toward "rogue states"—although North Korea had expressed its condolences and "opposition to all forms of terrorism" the day after September 11, President Bush listed it along with Iraq and Iran as an element of the "axis of evil" in his January 2002 State of the Union speech. In 2003, North Korea declared its withdrawal from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); in doing so, it cited Article X of the treaty, which permits withdrawal in cases in which the "supreme interests" of a signatory country are jeopardized.

Thus, whether North Korea is somehow uniquely unable to be trusted is very much open to interpreta-

tion. Over the past two decades, the United States has also abrogated more than its share of arms control and other international agreements. It withdrew unilaterally from the Antiballistic Missile Treaty with Russia in 2001 and from the Paris Climate Accord recently, and it has been pursuing a costly modernization of its own nuclear arsenal of over four thousand warheads, making its fulfillment of its commitment to eventual nuclear disarmament—a responsibility that falls on the United States as a nuclear-weapon State Party under the NPT—an even more distant prospect. President Trump's public consideration of U.S. withdrawal from the international nuclear treaty with Iran is particularly poorly-timed for convincing North Korea that any path other than development of its own nuclear forces is possible.

Historians for Peace and Democracy (HPAD; formerly Historians Against the War) was formed in January 2003 to oppose the Bush Administration's drive for a pre-emptive, illegal invasion of Iraq. We participated actively in the antiwar movement of the Bush years, and we have continued to campaign for peace and diplomacy internationally, while extending our support for Palestinian human rights. Now, with the ascent of an extreme rightwing administration contemptuous of constitutional norms, we will add to our mission fighting for free speech and academic freedom for all members of campus communities, and for the human rights of our students, especially the undocumented, Muslims, people of color, women and LGBTQ people. We will challenge the "fake news" and "alternative facts" that

have driven the right's ascent, and defend the discipline of history against attempts to reduce it to affirmations of "American greatness," documenting how prior eras of reaction were successfully combatted. Finally, we recognize that the Trump-Pence Administration is a threat not only to the people of the United States, but to the people of the world, and we will continue to stand against a new nuclear arms race, more imperial interventions, and collaboration with authoritarian regimes.

If you are a historian, a teacher, or a historically-minded activist, you are welcome in HPAD. Go to our website for resources and more about how to become active: www.historiansforpeace.org.