Recalibrating U.S. Policy Toward North Korea

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North Korea’s advancing nuclear and ballistic missile program is one of the most serious national security challenges that Donald Trump faces as president. The new administration has a narrow window of opportunity to recalibrate U.S. policy toward North Korea and seek a lasting arrangement that halts and then ultimately rolls back Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program.

Currently, North Korea is assessed to have the capability to deliver a warhead on a short- or medium-range ballistic missile, threatening allies and U.S. troops in the region. But if North Korea remains on its current trajectory, it could soon begin testing an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and deploy the system within the next decade, which would pose a direct threat to the continental United States and upset the security situation in East Asia.

A concerted diplomatic effort aimed first at freezing North Korea’s nuclear and missile testing, followed by negotiations designed to roll back Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program, will be difficult and may not succeed. However, when compared to other policy options, it stands the best chance of halting North Korea’s program.

The Obama administration’s policy toward North Korea, known as ‘strategic patience,’ failed to halt Pyongyang’s illicit nuclear and missile activities. The strategic patience approach involved increasing sanctions pressure on North Korea and returning to negotiations only after Pyongyang took steps toward denuclearization, which it committed to in the Six Party Talks with the United States, China, South Korea, Russia and Japan in 2005.

The onerous preconditions in the Obama administration’s policy approach, coupled with the failure to provide sufficient incentives, prevented the resumption of negotiations with North Korea. Instead, over the past eight years, North Korea expanded its stockpile of weapons-usable nuclear material, conducted four nuclear tests, and accelerated its missile activities.

North Korea’s leadership is likely waiting for Washington to signal what its approach will be. They will not likely wait long. The Financial Times reported February 1 that the White House launched a review of its North Korea policy.

A new U.S. policy that first seeks to resume negotiations, followed by pressure if North Korea scuttles diplomatic efforts, is still no guarantee of success. But is the most promising approach.

North Korea’s Advancing Programs

North Korea is currently estimated to possess about 50 kilograms of separated plutonium, enough material for more than 10 warheads, and activities suggest that its stockpile will continue to expand.

Kim Jong-Un stated his intention to continue expanding the country’s nuclear arsenal. Most recently in his annual New Years address on Jan. 1, 2017, he said that North Korea “will continue to build up” its nuclear forces... as long as the United States and its vassal forces keep on nuclear threat and blackmail and as long as they do not stop their war games they stage at our doorstep disguising them as annual events.”

To that end, Pyongyang restarted its 5mw nuclear reactor at Yongbyong in August 2013, which has
since operated intermittently. The reactor produced the plutonium that North Korea used for its nuclear program, but was shut down in 2007 as part of the Six Party Talks. Satellite imagery from 38 North, a site run by the U.S. Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) suggests that North Korea’s reprocessing facility, which separates plutonium for weapons from the reactor’s spent fuel, is also operating.

North Korea is also known to possess centrifuges, and may enrich uranium for weapons purposes. Based on estimates from North Korea’s known centrifuge facility, Pyongyang could have produced enough highly-enriched uranium for an estimated 6-8 warheads, bringing the total count to 16-18 as of late 2016. Independent experts assess that North Korea could have as many as 20-100 warheads by 2020.

It is highly likely that North Korea is also taking steps to refine its warhead design, both to increase the explosive yield and develop a miniaturized weapon that can be mounted on a ballistic missile.

After the February 2013 test, North Korea claimed it had tested a miniaturized device. Pyongyang announced after the January 2016 test that it exploded a hydrogen bomb. While it is extremely unlikely that Pyongyang did test a hydrogen bomb, North Korea may have tested a boosted fission device. Boosted fission increases the explosive yield of a warhead by using isotopes of hydrogen to increase the efficiency of the reaction. While the assertions that North Korea tested a miniaturized or boosted fission device cannot be ascertained with certainty, continued testing gives Pyongyang more information about the performance of its warheads.

North Korea’s missile testing activity also indicates that Pyongyang is taking steps to extend the range of its ballistic missiles and develop delivery options, including a submarine launched ballistic missile (SLBM).

In 2016, North Korea tested its Musudan missile eight times, the first tests of the missile since it was unveiled in 2010. The Musudan is a medium-range ballistic missile that experts assess could deliver a 650-kilogram payload over 1,200 kilometers. There is uncertainty about the range of the system, given there was only one successful test. However, a 1,200-kilometer range puts South Korea, Japan, and parts of China and Russia within range, but falls short of Guam. Although only one of the tests was a success, North Korea gained data relevant to the performance of the Musudan and its longer-range systems.

North Korea is also taking steps to field SLBMs. John Schilling, an aerospace engineer, suggests that North Korea could initially field this capability in the second half of 2018. If North Korea can successfully field nuclear-tipped SLBMs, it would pose a regional threat, and could allow Pyongyang to evade the regional missile defense system set for deployment in South Korea. Given the nature of North Korea’s submarines and the estimated range of the SLBM, it is unlikely to pose an intercontinental threat.

Given North Korea’s continued production of fissile material and its ballistic missile activities, the threat posed by its nuclear program will continue to grow, unless checked.

“A New Approach” Toward North Korea

The new U.S. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, recognized the need for a new approach to North Korea during his confirmation process. In a response to written questions from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Tillerson said that “North Korea is one of the leading threats to regional and global security. If confirmed, I will work closely with my interagency colleagues to develop a new approach to proactively address the multitude of threats that North Korea poses to its neighbors and the international community.”

Tillerson, however, provided little insight into what his approach will be. He mentioned working with regional partners to increase pressure on North Korea and further isolate the country. He also talked about the need for China to enforce UN sanctions and mentioned the possibility of secondary sanctions if Beijing does not enhance its compliance.

Steps such as increasing sanctions on North Korea or putting in place secondary sanctions for failure
to implement UN measures, do not alone constitute a strategy that will halt North Korea’s advancing nuclear weapons program and ultimately roll it back. Indeed, pursing certain types of sanctions could have the opposite effect - secondary sanctions on China could alienate Beijing.

First and foremost, the Trump administration’s new policy should focus on signaling to Pyongyang that Washington is ready and willing to engage in serious negotiations without preconditions.

To start, the new administration should deliver a message directly and carefully to North Korea’s leadership that recalls positive statements that Pyongyang has made about negotiations over its nuclear program, such as to Pyongyang’s statement from July 2016 calling for denuclearization of the entire Korean Peninsula: “The denuclearization being called for by the DPRK is the denuclearization of the whole Korean peninsula and this includes the dismantlement of nukes in South Korea and its vicinity.” This will also make clear that the United States remains committed to denuclearization as the end state in negotiations with Pyongyang.

The United States should also simultaneously reach out to states in the region to discuss the administration’s negotiating position and provide assurances that Washington remains committed to the security of its allies. Clear communication with China, given its close relationship with North Korea, will be particularly necessary. In the communication with President Xi, the United States should emphasize importance of China strictly enforcing existing sanctions, and the U.S. intent not to seek new sanctions as long as the North acts with restraint, including no nuclear and missile flight tests.

If North Korea is willing to negotiate, initial talks should focus on obtaining a moratorium to prevent additional nuclear and ballistic missile tests. The advantage of pursuing a testing freeze is that it would prevent North Korea from continuing to advance its capabilities, halting progress toward an ICBM and an SLBM capability.

The United States will need to be prepared to put something on the table in return for North Korea’s commitment to freeze nuclear and missile tests. After consultations with Seoul, Washington might consider scaling-back or delaying its annual joint military exercises with South Korea. The United States could also commit not to take actions viewed by North Korea as deliberately threatening, such as flying nuclear-capable bombers over the Korean peninsula.

The advantage of putting military exercises on the table is that they can easily be scaled back up if North Korea breaks the agreement and conducts a test. Monitoring for nuclear and missile tests also does not require inspectors on the ground.

Another option could be a U.S. commitment to delay the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system, so long as Pyongyang observes a strict test moratorium. Beijing has voiced a strong opposition to the system over concerns that the THAAD radar coverage will include parts of China. In addition to alienating China, deploying THAAD could provoke Pyongyang to continue developing missiles capabilities that would allow it to evade and/or overwhelm U.S. missile defenses in the region.

If the initial moratorium holds, North Korea and the United States could discuss steps that would roll back Pyongyang’s nuclear activities, including a verifiable halt to fissile material production (including plutonium production and uranium enrichment) that would be monitored by international inspectors into North Korea’s nuclear sites. In return, the United States might extend to North Korea limited sanctions relief and negative security assurances against military attack under certain conditions.

To maintain leverage, the United States and its partners should strengthen implementation of UN Security Council-mandated sanctions that have not been fully enforced thus far. This would also preserve the option to try to increase economic and financial sanctions pressure if North Korea refuses to negotiate.
Flawed Alternatives
Other policy approaches pose very high risks and have a low chance of success. A campaign to impose crippling sanctions on the North is likely to fail, since it will be opposed by China. Any attempt to coerce Beijing will likely be met with a strong response, creating a rift that North Korea will exploit to continue to move forward with its weapons of mass destruction programs. Preemptive military strikes will face severe operational difficulties and almost certainly a strong, likely military, response from Pyongyang that could trigger a second Korean War. It would also be opposed by South Korea and Japan and draw China into what may be an escalating regional conflict.

Conclusion
The dangers posed by North Korea—ranging from the direct threat to the United States and a growing threat to South Korea and Japan, to the possibility that Pyongyang will transfer nuclear technology abroad to earn hard currency—cannot be ignored. Simply maintaining the current policy will not slow North Korea’s advances; and more robust missile defenses provide only a partial defense for the United States and its allies, at best.

In formulating a more effective approach, the new administration must jettison flawed assumptions that have underpinned a failed U.S. policy for the past eight years. A new policy that tries negotiations first, and then puts pressure on the North if its intransigence scuttles diplomacy, is still no guarantee of success, but is the most promising approach.

—DARYL G. KIMBALL, executive director and KELSEY DAVENPORT, director of nonproliferation policy

- Daryl G. Kimball
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