

The Rise of North Korea's Nuclear Relevancy:  
Recommendations for Maintaining Northeast Asian Stability Through Denuclearization

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## **Introduction**

If you are a new military service member assigned to any unit under the command of United States Forces Korea (USFK), the phrase “Fight Tonight Readiness” becomes a staple in your vocabulary. The motto is no mere *esprit de corps* maxim to raise moral and pride among the thousands of Soldiers, Sailors, Airman, and Marines serving in the Republic of Korea. It is a reminder that in everything USFK does it should be in the mindset of being prepared. The enemy to be prepared against is one that has been a persistent threat on the Korean Peninsula for over seven decades and continues to challenge the patience of the global community for its continued provocations and rhetoric aimed at regional discontent; North Korea.

Since the conclusion of the Korean War in 1953, North Korea has continually been a belligerent state bent on regime survival, autonomy, and domination of the Korean Peninsula. Commonly, North Korea’s historical precedent for advertising to the global community that it continues to pursue these goals were military provocations, parades, and aggressive political rhetoric. With the succession of Kim Jong Un in 2012, however, North Korea added a considerably more dangerous tactic to achieving national objectives, that of advancing their nuclear program. From nuclear testing, developing nuclear equipped ballistic missiles, and challenging established nuclear-powered states, North Korea is generating conditions throughout Northeast Asia that may have disastrous consequences if handled improperly. As a chief ally of South Korea and Japan, as well as being the focal point of North Korea’s nuclear aggression rhetoric, the US must play a primary role in resolving this empirical security threat on the Korean Peninsula.

There are arguments within the policy field against a US strategy aimed at denuclearizing North Korea. Commonly, the discussion usually involves how the common US goals of North

Korean humanitarian aid raises and overall threat reduction come out of focus as soon as the topic of denuclearization finds its way in any sort of diplomatic dialogue (Kristian, 2021).

However, North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons has been resolute for many years, and the risks posed to regional and international stability far outweigh a policy approach of indifference towards such a program.

The primary objective of this professional paper will be to analyze North Korea's nuclear program and give recommendations on courses of action the US can take to achieve denuclearization for North Korea. First, an examination towards the history of North Korea's nuclear ambition will be provided, through the nuclear acquisition policies of Kim Il-sung to the implementation of a true nuclear program with Kim Jong Il. Second, North Korea's current nuclear program will be covered, highlighting Kim Jong Un's aggressive approach to developing a modern strategic force by fusing ballistic missile and nuclear technology and the ensuing diplomatic consequences forced by these efforts. Next, the future of North Korea's nuclear program will be explored, highlighting the many challenges North Korea faces should it continue a national objective of nuclear superpower. Finally, a list of US strategic options for denuclearizing North Korea will be proposed, ranging from Chinese engagement to revival of the Six Party Talks.

By the end of this paper, the reader should have a detailed and comprehensive understanding of North Korea's nuclear history and the modern-day threat that it poses to global stability. Furthermore, understanding of a how the US can deescalate, denuclearize, and usher in peace to the Korean Peninsula should also become apparent through the reading of this paper.

While a continuously dangerous international actor, there is reason for hope that through a

careful and correct approach, North Korea will abandon its nuclear program and integrate as a core state among global partners.

## **Section One: History of North Korean Nuclear Policy**

### **I. Post-World War II and the Beginning of North Korea**

By looking at any history curriculum from the North Korean Kim Il-sung Research Institute, you will find that it is filled with fantastical images of Kim Il-sung's struggle to defeat the imperialism of Japan and begin a new, prosperous Korean nation. A young Kim becomes a superior warrior and leader throughout the 1930 campaigns in the Japanese controlled territory of Manchuria, earning the nickname "The Tiger" from Japanese Soldiers. Later he discards his given name Kim Song-ju for Kim Il-sung, meaning "Kim became the sun," and encounters the Red Army on the banks of the Amur River. A great and prosperous friendship between Kim and the Soviet Union is born, and the dawn of the "Eternal Father" and his enduring grand campaign of defeating imperial capitalism begins (Sommerlad, 2018).

Political propaganda and manipulation are common ways that North Korea has for decades either tricked or strong-armed its population through fear into believing North Korea has a much more grand and rich history than it does. The true beginnings of North Korea reach back to the end of World War II in the summer of 1945. After short, though intense, fighting along the Northern half of the Korean peninsula, the Soviet Army had defeated their adversaries and began to flow military forces into what is now North Korea. While it could have likely taken the Southern portion as well, at this stage in World War II the Soviet Union was still respecting agreements made with Washington D.C. on two separate Korean zones of occupation (Lankov, 4).

This envisioned divisional provision was a trusteeship proposed by US President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the 1945 Yalta Conference. Roosevelt proposed that the US, Russia, and China set conditions for a free and independent Korea, with the details of its division and

governing set by the Post-World War allied powers. However, the US had devoted little planning or consideration to this proposal, and after the 1945 Yalta conference, US State Department officials were unprepared for the fast influx of Soviet military and political personnel into Northern Korea (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 4).

As a result, the planning of Post-War Korea became a headache for US foreign policy makers, as their sights had been focused on Japan. Viewing Korea as a serious national security concern requiring immediate action based on Soviet movements, a late-night executive session was convened at the White House on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1945. US Army Colonels Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel hastily proposed an occupation zone for US forces South of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel and for Soviet Forces North of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. Unlike the two thousand civil affairs officers and elaborate administrative planning US occupied Japan had received, no such conditions existed for a Korean scenario. Regardless, US military forces were ordered to occupy their respective zones, and on August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1948 General John R. Hodge proclaimed a US-backed Republic of Korea. The Soviets followed suit, and on September 9, 1948 proclaimed a Soviet-backed Democratic People's Republic of Korea (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 5-6).

While US foreign policy decisions on how to handle the situation unfolding on the Korean Peninsula as World War II ended were underwhelming, the Soviet Union took a different approach, putting forth serious effort in developing its stake in the recently occupied Northern territory of Korea. During the early 1920s, Communism had begun to spread among native Koreans. However, due to the harshness of Japanese occupation, many Communist Koreans operated outside of their home country until 1945. After the conclusion of World War II, those who still believed in Communism and lived in Korea resided in Seoul, and therefore were outside the jurisdiction of the Soviet backed government. To help raise communism numbers in

their new territory, Soviet leadership began to recruit and import Communists from outside of Korea. Communist officials and technical experts were sent from Moscow and China and were recruited from the US-controlled South Korean area. One of the most important groups of Communists came from the Korean guerilla militias that operated in Northeast China in the 1930s fighting the Japanese (Lankov, 5).

While Koreans viewed their military exploits as heroic, the Korean guerilla campaigns of the 1930s were ultimately futile given the military might of Imperial Japan. With the guerilla resistance doomed to collapse in 1940, many soldiers who fought in these units were later conscripted into the Soviet Army and then re-patriated as Koreans after hostilities ended in 1945. These re-patriated citizens then served as advisors and intermediaries in Korea for Soviet occupation forces (Lankov, 5-6).

One such re-patriated guerilla was Kim Il-sung, viewed by many as an important and up and coming leader in Soviet affairs. Although young and having an appearance that was viewed as unheroic-like, akin to “a fat delivery boy from a neighborhood Chinese food stall,” Kim Il-sung was selected between the years of 1945 and 1946 by the Soviet Union as their Premier in Northern Korea. While it may be forever debated as to why he was chosen, Kim Il-sung had a great grasp of the Russian language, was a Korean native, and whose military exploits, while largely exaggerated, were known to many Koreans (Lankov, 6).

Between 1945 and 1948, Kim Il-sung and North Korea operated under the instruction of the Soviet Union. The 1946 Land Reform Law, 1948 North Korean Constitution, and several other matters of civil administrations were managed by Soviet Union leadership. Even the relatively mundane government processes of writing and giving speeches by North Korean officials had to be first approved by the Soviet Embassy in Pyongyang. These reforms and

prescribed decision-making styles were common for the many nascent Soviet political regimes of the time. Regardless, Kim Il-sung had no desire to be a puppet of the USSR or any other state. As a young ex-guerilla, while still believing in the push for international Communism, he and his followers were unwilling to sacrifice Korea's national interest for another nation. While remaining in-line with Soviet orders and policy, Kim Il-sung's drive for national independence would soon manifest itself into the first major conflict after World War II (Lankov, 8).

The main theme that can be seen when looking at the inception of North Korea is the stark contrast of East and West planning. Specifically, the United States was unprepared to undertake any definitive action in Korea, and rightfully so. Wrapping up two different fronts of a world war, the US was a chief engineer in organizing a new international system designed to reset a devastated and weary world. In contrast, the Soviet Union was much more proactive in initiating political dominance in the new Post-World War II era, establishing considerable influence in the East. This allowed North Korea to become a primary point of interest for Soviet grand strategy.

From a modern-day nuclear situation perspective, installing Kim Il-sung as its leader is where North Korean nuclear philosophy likely begins. As a Communist disillusioned with the capitalist societies of the Western world, a guerilla who fought against a violent and efficient Imperial Japan, a leader under Soviet sponsorship, and a nationalist who dreamed of a re-unified Korea, Kim Il-sung had the political youth, support, and drive to achieve great feats by any means necessary. While nuclear ambition would come later, his aggressive means of leadership and international discourse would soon manifest in 1950 and establish one of the most enduring negative political relationships of our time, that of the US and North Korea.



## **II. The Korean War**

Despite being unprepared to handle a quickly evolving situation on the Korean peninsula, the US acted to establish a presence in Korea. Once the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel was established as the demarcation between US and Soviet forces, the United States quickly deployed several military and civic advisors to Southern Korea. Upon arriving, the US military officers and civil advisors soon found themselves in a precarious position. Due to decades of years spent under foreign intervention or rule, many of the Koreans meant to be advisors were not up to the task of working with their new US counterparts. Making matters worse, the gap between US and Soviet relations was beginning to sour (Fehrenbach, 25).

The Russian plan for the Korean peninsula was becoming evident, one of a single Korea under Soviet rule. The initial attempts to achieve this were through overt abandonment of diplomatic norms, such as lack of cooperation on the rebuilding of the Korean economy or granting free passage North of the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel into Soviet controlled territory. Making matters worse, US officials were starting to recognize that its own aim of establishing and maintaining societal order through military control was becoming an exhaustive burden. Even during a period that was characterized by foreign policy principles of the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan, President Truman's administration was unable to win political and public support to continuing exerting maximum pressure and resources to buffer Soviet influence in Korea. Characterized best by a letter sent to the Secretary of Defense by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in 1947: "From the standpoint of military security, the United States has little strategic interest in maintaining the present troops and bases in Korea" (Fehrenbach, 25-30).

Identifying that it had been unable to achieve success in Southern Korea through foreign military means, the US turned to more political solutions. Though a lengthy and exacting

process, the people of Southern Korea elected Syngman Rhee in 1948, and on January 1, 1949 recognized the new sovereign Republic of Korea. Seeing the reigns of power finally being taken by the people of South Korea and being cognizant of the political winds that blew domestically, US national security leaders turned away from South Korea, along with most of its military (Fehrenbach, 32-33). Coincidentally, the Soviet Union followed suit. By the end of 1948, the Soviet Union had redeployed much of its military power from the peninsula and left control of North Korea to the Kim Il-sung regime (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 7).

Unfortunately, while the major world powers of the USSR and US thought they had successfully solved the challenges of a divided Korea, civil war broke out along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel between North and South Korean military factions vying for military superiority. These skirmishes came to a head on June 25, 1950 when North Korea, with Soviet and Chinese backing, invaded South Korea with the aim of unifying Korea under the Kim Il-sung regime (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 7).

The political machinations and ambitions of Kim Il-sung finally revealed themselves. He was no longer comfortable with being given orders from his Soviet sponsors and was ready to take matters into his own hands on the question of Korean unification. While it took several requests and an in person meeting between Kim Il-sung and Joseph Stalin in April of 1950, war that would be “swift” and “won within three days” began (Lankov, 12).

Kim Il-sung’s invasion went according to plan, and by August 1950 North Korean military forces controlled 95% of the Korean Peninsula. Fearing that their exit from Korean affairs in 1949 had undermined the security situation that led to the current conflict unfolding in Korea, the US planned and launched a comprehensive counterattack against North Korean forces in September 1950. Thanks to the military might of the US and authorization from the United

Nations (UN), North Korean military forces were severely attrited and forced to retrograde to the Chinese border. Sensing that North Korea would soon capitulate, and the entire Korean Peninsula would be molded under US and Western control, China entered the war alongside North Korea. This intervention drove back US Forces to the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel in the winter of 1950 (Lankov 13). Combat operations finally ended in July 1953 with the signing of the Armistice Agreement, which is still in effect today.

While neither of the major global powers at the time used nuclear weapons, the Korean War was a savage and costly. Although the numbers are disputed, it is estimated that military lives lost were 900,000 for China, 520,000 for North Korea, and 420,000 for UN-sponsored commands (primarily consisting of South Korea and the US). Three million, a tenth of the population of the entire Korean peninsula, were either killed, wounded, or became missing because of the war, with another five million becoming refugees. Economically, the two countries property loses were estimated at \$2 billion, equivalent to their combined gross national product in 1949 (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 8).

Despite the cost of the Korean War, both the US and North Korea became resolute in their assessment of one another's motives and mission against the other. The US, viewing North Korea as a potential hotspot of Communism and anti-West sentiment, resolved to maintain its military presence and support to its South Korea ally. North Korea, on the other hand, gave swift and unlimited power to Kim Il-sung. The Korean War swelled Kim Il-sung's popularity and allowed him the ability to purge his other Communist official peers. Gaining unlimited power and using his careful planning and diplomacy between the Soviet Union and China, Kim Il-sung set North Korea on a path of self-reliance and militarism that would define its future domestic and foreign policy (Lankov, 13-16).

The key to understanding the Korean War is to examine political conditions of the time. Although being the sole nuclear superpower at the time, the US was closely following the spread of Communism and the rise of Soviet power in the East. The situation of post-World War II was causing Communism to recede in Europe, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization would further strengthen that trend. While Communism was succeeding in Asia, it could not fully succeed until US presence either subsided or was damaged. Therefore, success in Korea was of utmost importance for the Soviet Union.

Quoting Carl von Clausewitz, “When whole communities go to war – whole peoples, and especially civilized peoples – the reason always lies in some political situation and the occasion is always due to some political object. War, therefore, is an act of policy” (Clausewitz, 98). What Clausewitz outlines in this passage is that when war is initiated, it is done so to meet political ends only achievable through war. In the case of the Korean War, for the Soviet Union’s Communist agenda to succeed in Asia, certain conditions would need to be met, primarily the elimination of Communist opposition. Allowing Kim Il-sung to initiate a campaign to conquer Korea would serve these ends, as it would be done so by a Communist state and therefore further Soviet political aims.

The issue with this assessment is that there is a clear lack of planning or consideration for an unsuccessful war. While the US may not have wanted to engage in political or military affairs over time on the Korean Peninsula, there is a degree of Soviet miscalculation on a US response to North Korean aggression that nearly upended the USSR’s Korean strategy. But even more of a failure was effectively dealing with the aftermath of the Korean War, and specifically Kim Il-sung. As the chief orchestrator of the Korean War, Kim Il-sung became a national hero and gained complete control over North Korea affairs after its conclusion. Using this new status and

power, Kim Il-sung for several years navigated the political space between the Soviet Union and China, ultimately undermining Soviet goals to strengthen his own. This had an alienating effect on North Korea and ushered in the philosophy of “Juche”, or national self-reliance. Not having dependable allies and being an international outlier likely served as a springboard to fuel North Korean nuclear ambitions throughout the Cold War and beyond.

### **III. North Korean Nuclear Diplomacy During the Cold War**

While the Korean War ended in a stalemate, there is consensus among historians and policy professionals that one of the factors contributing to the end of active conflict on the Korean peninsula was the US threat of employing nuclear weapons against North Korea. The Korean War was a product of Eastern and Western alliances fighting each other. The Soviet Union would not allow the US to unify the Korean peninsula under a capitalist banner, in the same way that it was fighting hard to deter an all-German, anti-Soviet government in Europe. For this reason, Moscow deployed several military resources to help its Chinese neighbors bolster North Korean forces and buffer the US counterattack that almost resulted in the defeat of Kim Il-sung’s military campaign to conquer South Korea.

To break the deadlock, the US considered multiple scenarios that would have involved the release of nuclear weapons or materials against North Korean and Chinese Forces. One proposed by General Douglas MacArthur involved the dumping of radioactive materials in North Korea. A second, more persuasive, solution was invoked in 1953 by then newly elected US President Dwight Eisenhower and involved the threat of nuclear weapons use. In his memoirs, Eisenhower said “We dropped the word, discreetly...we felt quite certain it would reach Soviet and Chinese Communist ears.” While it is impossible to know whether the Soviets took the

threat as decisive, the Korean War promptly ended in the same year Eisenhower's threat was issued (Brands, 394).

North Korean hopes of unifying Korea under one banner ended in an armistice, due primarily, as they saw it, to the deterrent of nuclear arms. For this reason, the race to develop and poses its own nuclear weapons became a national obsession, both to preserve their own sovereignty and to establish their own renown as an international superpower.

The first stirring of a nuclear program in North Korea dates to the 1953 Armistice Agreement ending the Korean War. The Soviet Union and North Korea signed agreements to cooperate in nuclear research, allowing North Korean scientists to travel and work in Moscow's Dubna Nuclear Research Center. Additionally, the Soviets provided a small experimental nuclear reactor to North Korea, placing the reactor under the inspection of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to prevent any nuclear materials being retrofitted into a weapon (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 196).

North Korea's true push for an independent nuclear weapons program began in 1964, after China successfully completed its first nuclear device detonation. In a petition to Mao Tse-tung, Kim Il-sung referenced the shared fight against the United States as the chief reason China and North Korea should work together to discover the secrets of nuclear technology. China was unmoved by this request, claiming that "this [nuclear program] was a very expensive program...North Korea is a very small country. [Chinese leaders thought] it wasn't needed" (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 197).

Following another denied request to China in 1974, North Korea viewed its nuclear ambition as hopeless unless it developed their own program internally. In the late 1970s, Kim Il-sung authorized the North Korean Academy of Sciences, the Army, and the Ministry of Public

Security to begin the implementation of a nuclear weapons program. Stirrings throughout diplomatic communities began to pick up on North Korea's aggressive push to create nuclear weapons, fueled primarily by North Korea's requests for nuclear power station materials. These requests were a disguise to instead accumulate resources that would be important for the development of a military nuclear program. However, it was extremely difficult to ascertain this assessment due to the maximum security and secretiveness surrounding such a program. After extensive requests to Soviet leader Konstantin Chernenko, in December 1985 an agreement was signed to supply four light weight nuclear power reactors to North Korea (Oberdorfer & Carlin 197-198).

Eventually by this time North Korea was a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), it was clear at the international level that North Korea was beginning to succeed in cultivating a nuclear program, either civilian or military. In 1989, US president George H. W. Bush and his administration became concerned at the developing situation on the Korean peninsula as it related to North Korea's nuclear program. Concluding that it could not be solved without help from international partners with interests in North East Asian affairs, the US began sending delegations to Seoul and Tokyo to inform them of recently gathered intelligence on North Korean nuclear affairs. The bottom line of the briefings was that at its current rate, North Korea would be able to have a functional nuclear weapons program by the mid-1990s. The contents of these briefings were quickly leaked and began a frenzy of media circulation that dominated news headlines and brought North Korea into an unpleasant global spotlight (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 199-200).

The result of the North Korean nuclear revelation was worldwide calls to have inspectors from the IAEA visit North Korean nuclear facilities to ascertain whether or not its facilities were

being used for nuclear weapons production, in violation of their agreements under the NPT. North Korea's hesitation about this agreement was primarily based on its threat assessment of US weapons of mass destruction distributed throughout the world, and particularly in South Korea. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, several nuclear weapons had been placed in South Korea by the US as a deterrent against the North Korean threat. Even though most of those weapons had been removed by 1990, there was still a perceived nuclear threat to North Korea by the presence of such equipment (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 200-201).

To bridge the gap between the United States, South Korea, and North Korea, a series of diplomatic meetings were held from 1991 through 1992. The primary goal was to find common ground to normalize North-South Korean relations to create positive relations for the US and North Korea in the future. The first was the December Accords between North and South Korea in December of 1991, which served as the first time a declaration was made by both governments to accept the other as a legitimate regime and sovereign national power. The next was a high-level political summit hosted at the United Nations between the US and North Korea where an agreement was reached for North Korea to sign a safeguard agreement with the IAEA and allow for inspections at their Yongbyon nuclear facility (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 203-208).

Unfortunately, the progress was short-lived. Upon inspection of North Korea's Yongbyon nuclear facility, several discrepancies over the amount of plutonium produced and for how long came to light, bringing into question North Korean nuclear program transparency. Willi Theis, the IAEA North Korean inspection chief in 1992, best summed up the findings by saying "North Korea grossly underestimated the agency's measurement capability... They never expected us to be able to perform isotopic analyses. They could not understand this or explain the [test result] differences. The more they learned, the more they provided manufactured



responses. We had to approach them harder and harder as they realized we were going to discover their wrongdoings” (Oberdorfer & Carlin, 210-212).

As a result of the recent IAEA inspections on North Korea’s nuclear facility at Yongbyon, the US and South Korea resumed the previously canceled joint military exercise Team Spirit in 1992 to pressure North Korea into being more forthcoming on its nuclear program. Additionally, after receiving several military satellite photos of construction at Yongbyon, the Director General of the IAEA, Hans Blix, pressured North Korea into submitting to additional inspections of their nuclear facility. Upon seeing the international reaction and condemnation to the recent visits to Yongbyon by the IAEA, on March 8, 1992 North Korea ordered their armed forces to assume a war readiness posture. Furthermore, on March 12, 1992 North Korea issued a statement that it planned to remove itself from the NPT. Although the Cold War ended during the first few years of the 1990s, many were beginning to realize that a new emerging nuclear threat in North Korea might complicate efforts to stabilize a post-Soviet Union world (Oberdorfer and Carlin, 213-218).

One of the leading theories as to why North Korea engages in a nuclear program is due to its strategic goal of maintaining regime survival. If the claims by past US policy makers are maintained and the US did use the threat of nuclear weapons use to bring the Korean War stalemate to an end in 1953, then it is not hard to see why Kim Il-sung viewed nuclear weapons as such an overpowering threat. After all, he had the complete backing of China and the Soviet Union with his regime, and yet they seemingly capitulated once nuclear weapons use was brought into the discussion to end conflict. Seeing the awesome power of the nuclear detonations over Nagasaki and Hiroshima by the US in 1945 as well as known US deployment of nuclear weapons throughout Asian strategic locations during the 1950s, North Korea’s

development of a nuclear program can be better understood as a critical component to achieving their national objective of sovereignty.

Through the lens of the Cold War, there are two major themes when analyzing North Korean nuclear policy and diplomacy: absence of Soviet or Chinese involvement, and a lack of understanding between North Korea and the international community. Concerning an absence of Soviet involvement, several factors contributed. Upon conclusion of the Korean War, both the Soviet Union and China underwent several political, economic, and societal changes. The changes that most resonated with Kim Il-sung's North Korean regime were those of China, which displayed a more autocratic notion of Communism.

As such, relations between Pyongyang and Moscow waned, and Soviet support for a North Korean nuclear program diminished. Hoping to connect with their neighbors throughout Southern Asia, China also had no interest in sharing its nuclear weapons knowledge with North Korea. This relationship further drives the assessment as to why North Korea developed and continues to practice the Juche philosophy of self-reliance in all aspects of governance. Had North Korea reached a greater relationship with the Soviet Union or been made a partner of China's nuclear program, its approach to its own program would have likely looked much different.

The lack of understanding by both North Korea and the international community on the nuclear issue is a challenge that persists today. The defiance of North Korea is the more interesting factor. The tremendous diplomatic headway it had made with both the US and South Korea during the late 1980s and early 1990s was essentially negated in a matter of months because of disputes over IAEA findings at the Yongbyon nuclear facility. Understanding the military might of the US, which had been on display in Iraq and the Gulf War just months prior,

as well as its position as an established nuclear superpower, North Korea decided to show defiance and prepare for conflict with its longtime adversaries to the West as negotiations broke down in 1992. This runs contrary to North Korea's strategy of regime survival, as any conflict with the US and its allies would almost surely involve the destruction of North Korea and the end of the Kim regime. Furthermore, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 would have made it extremely difficult for any sizeable intervention by North Korea's traditional allies of China and Russia against a US led assault.

Whatever calculations led to such dramatic posturing against the US and South Korea in 1992, it served to maintain North Korea's commitment for a nuclear program. More importantly, it begins a trend of US-North Korean relations that will persist over several years, that of either intense military provocation or astounding diplomatic breakthrough.

#### **IV. Kim Jong Il, North Korea's First Nuclear Weapon Test, and the Six Party Talks**

In 1994, Kim Il-sung died, and the reins of power passed to his son, Kim Jong Il. While the transfer of power from one individual to another should have been met with the fervent march towards achieving new or old policy goals, reaffirming a position as a power, and continuing to instill national pride in citizens, North Korea was in a dire situation. The collapse of the Soviet Union, natural disasters, famine, and losing ideological and cultural battles with South Korea created consequential challenges to the political situation in North Korea. Millions of North Koreans began to flee to neighboring nations, and confidence in the Juche system of self-reliance began to subside (Woo, 65-66).

Kim Jong Il had begun to take the reins of power from his father as far back as 1980, rising to the rank of Marshal of the Korean People's Army (KPA) in 1992 and Chairman of the National Defense Commission in 1993. Despite those positions and anointed authority from his

father, Kim Jong Il did not officially proclaim himself leader of North Korea until three years later. This was due primarily to Kim Jong Il's recognition of the situation his country was facing at the time. The Korean Worker's Party (KWP), the primary political decision-making party in North Korea, was suffering from corruption, arrogance, and inactivity (Woo, 67).

Searching for an effective way to steer the situation to a more advantageous position, Kim Jong Il decided to adopt a new political philosophy involving a military-first approach. Viewing the KWP as an ineffective vessel for governing and managing North Korean society and security, the KPA under Kim Jong Il was elevated in status and authority, with the primary mission being the continued preservation of the Kim family regime. To ensure their mission was set up for success, this military-first policy began the country's total control of information, blocking of resources, and elimination of population collective action. Although draconian and authoritarian, the policy of Kim Jong Il was effective in establishing himself as the supreme North Korean authority figure and forming domestic political control (Woo, 68-70).

To serve the foreign policy ends of this military first policy, Kim Jong Il chose nuclear weapons as the primary tool. Consistent with his father Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong Il sought a nuclear program to demand an end to what North Korea perceived as US-led nuclear hostility and aggression towards their nation, and a bilateral peace treaty between North and South Korea. Absent any meaningful US acquiescence to these demands, North Korea would continue to march towards its goal of developing, testing, and creating an operational nuclear weapons force within the KPA. These developments enabled the diplomatic bargaining chip North Korea had needed for decades in developing international relations with the US, garnering international attention, and obtaining economic relief (Woo, 71).

This approach, utilizing the threat of developing nuclear weapons to achieve diplomatic victories, began to deteriorate over time. The US began utilizing section 311 of the Patriot Act in the early 2000s to target certain financial bodies within North Korea suspected of money laundering illegal and terrorist activity, which hit North Korean finances hard, and took a personal toll on the Kim family's treasury. Fearing a nuclear escalation by North Korea, the Six Party Talks were initiated in 2003 with the hopes of bringing the full panel of interested national powers of the United States, South Korea, China, Russia, Japan, and North Korea together to solve their linked nuclear issue. While the Six Party Talks were unsuccessful in convincing North Korea to give up its nuclear program, they were effective in creating an international forum where the delegations could freely discuss their Korea related security concerns (Lankov, 188-189).

Unfortunately, despite some progress with the Six Party Talks, Kim Jong Il and his regime drastically raised the stakes on the Korean peninsula when in October of 2006 North Korea detonated its first nuclear device. Kim Jong Il's military-first philosophy ushered in a process in which, whenever North Korea was presented with a situation it did not like, it resorted to military provocation or issuing threats to neighbors or adversaries. This enabled North Korea to gain concessions from diplomats and acquire international attention. It was a practice that worked with the US throughout the presidential administrations of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush (Lankov, 189-190). The nuclear test in October 2006 was one such event, with expected results.

Quickly the United Nations (UN) convened and unanimously passed Resolution 1718, barring any nation of the UN to trade or receive arms with North Korea (United Nations Security Council, 2006). Despite the UN resolution, for North Korea, the overall results were what they

wanted. After the test, Chinese economic and aid cooperation surged, and South Korea became even more willing to aid to their North Korean neighbors. The US eventually made agreements to resume aid to North Korea in exchange for North Korea's future cessation of its nuclear weapons program (Lankov, 190)

There was also another round of Six Party Talks in February 2007, resulting in the relief of economic sanctions on North Korea in exchange for the closure of the Yongbyon nuclear facility. Further progress was made in the September 2008 Six Party Talks, in which North Korea transmitted its list of nuclear activities while the US removed it from the Trading with the Enemy Act and State Sponsor of Terrorism list. Unfortunately, as it had done before, North Korea soon began to renege on the commitments it had made throughout the Six Party Talks process. North Korea never again became a member of the Six Party Talks from 2009 onward, unbinding itself from any agreements made. After releasing itself from the pressures of Six Party Talk nuclear diplomacy, North Korea would once again undergo a shift in domestic and foreign policy as Kim Jong Il passed away. Kim Jong Il's son, Kim Jong Un, would become the chairman of the Korean Workers Party in 2012 and set conditions for the modern approach to North Korea's nuclear program (Davenport, 2018).

It can be illuminating to examine Kim Jong Il's nuclear policy through a neoclassical realist lens. Neoclassical realism, according to Kenneth Waltz, is the idea that "the scope and ambition of a country's foreign policy is driven first and foremost by its place in the international system and specifically by its relative material powers capabilities." Waltz takes this definition one step further by claiming neoclassical realism focuses on "whether state leaders have the freedom to convert the nation's economic power into military power or translate the nation's

economic and military power into foreign affairs actions.” Some analysts argue Kim Jong Il was able to achieve neoclassical foreign policy success through this nuclear policy (Woo, 61-63).

Kim Jong Il’s nuclear policy was similar, but also different from his father’s. Kim Il-sung’s nuclear plan was the product of a means to protect the sovereignty of his nation and political power. Kim Jong Il’s nuclear policy was also about regime survival, but where the two diverge is their desired end-state. Kim Il-sung wanted a nuclear program so that North Korea could be a peer competitor on the global stage, a core realist framework, whereas Kim Jong Il needed a nuclear program to stabilize a nation that was about to capitulate from economic and political disarray.

What this establishes is that North Korea is a nation very in tune with the global political situation and capable of navigating that space. Public discourse has ridiculed North Korea as a nation that acts irrationally and one that is led by incompetent statesmen. However, if we look at Kim Jong Il’s military-first foreign policy objective of using the threat of nuclear weapons to hold up his crippled economy and social structure, then indeed he and his leadership deserve more credit than what is sometimes given to them.

The unexpected variable in Kim Jong Il’s nuclear policy was how effective it was in creating a situation in which North Korea was overwhelming successful with their 2006 nuclear test. By engineering a crisis, escalating it, and then deescalating in exchange for economic concessions, North Korea was able to achieve international renown without firing a bullet or deploying a military garrison to defensive positions along the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel. Figuring out how to maintain international nuclear presence without leading to a conflict scenario with the US would serve as the chief challenge for North Korea moving from Kim Jong Il to the modern-day Kim Jong Un nuclear policy (Lankov, 191).

## **Section Two: Modern Day North Korean Nuclear Policy**

### **I. Modern Day Nuclear North Korea – A Continuation of Past Strategy**

The historical look at North Korea from a nuclear policy perspective is one centered around power and preservation. This paper has already identified that the key factors in the development of a nuclear weapons program for North Korea were primarily the preservation and survival of the Kim family regime. This become even further defined if we examine it from three separate, but similar, lenses: 1) regime survival, 2) North Korean independence, and 3) Korean unification on North Korean terms (Scobell, vi).

Each of these three factors relates back to the nuclear issue. For North Korea's Kim regime to survive it must build and have operational nuclear weapons. If North Korea is to remain independent and a stakeholder in international affairs, the power and prestige of owning nuclear weapons must be achieved. Using nuclear weapons as a springboard, the Kim regime can strongarm South Korea and its Western allies into unifying the Korean Peninsula under North Korean rule.

Whether looking back at Kim Il-sung's persistence in obtaining nuclear materials and negotiating with his Soviet contemporaries on the nuclear issue, or at Kim Jong Il and his military first reorganization of North Korea's political system, each strategy's chief concern was nuclear weapons and their use to strengthen North Korea. From a contemporary glance, there is little evidence that North Korea has changed course in its stance on nuclear weapons.

In modern context, North Korea possesses nuclear capabilities and continues to develop its strategic forces for several reasons. The first is defense and deterrence. Having nuclear weapons ready to be used ensures a reliable defense posture against its long-time adversary, the United States. They are also a deterrent. North Korea's view of deterrence does not reach the



same scale as mutually assured destruction (MAD), as in the case of two countries like the United States and Russia. Rather, it threatens the United States in that it leaves open the possibility that North Korean nuclear weapons cannot all be eliminated in a first strike scenario and therefor nuclear destruction on US soil is ensured (Scobell & Sanford, 79-82, 83).

Offensive capability is the second factor driving North Korea's modern nuclear weapons program. While North Korea has recently increased its intercontinental payload ballistic missile capability, its nuclear weapon offense capacity will be primarily founded on conflict contained on the Korean Peninsula, an objective that goes back to unification of the Korea on North Korean terms. By using nuclear weapons as a sword as opposed to a shield, North Korea could justify war against South Korea and its allies, or at the very least threaten war to achieve national objectives (Scobell & Sanford, 82-83).

The third reason for North Korea's continued nuclear weapons development is for diplomatic leverage, in line with North Korean goal of maintaining national sovereignty through nuclear diplomacy. Several instances in the last thirty years point to North Korea as willing to engage in nuclear diplomacy up to surrendering its nuclear program entirely. Whether the several summits between the US and North Korea in the early 1990s, or the Six Party talks that extended from 2003-2009, North Korea has become versed in nuclear diplomacy and in creating time for itself to maneuver the complexities of nuclear weapon politics (Scobell & Sanford, 84).

A final reason driving North Korea's nuclear program today is prestige and status. North Korea is no stranger to inflating the standing and prestige of its nation and leaders. By successfully developing a nuclear weapon, North Korea viewed itself as having become a member of the exclusive "nuclear club." It has worn this as a badge of honor since detonating its first nuclear device in 2006. But simply being able to detonate a nuclear device is not the same

as having a robust nuclear weapons capability. North Korea will therefore continue to persist in its pursuit of nuclear weapons advancement so that it can continue to drive its prestige, both domestically and abroad (Scobell & Sanford, 84-87).

North Korea's persistent nuclear weapons program today mirrors its historical methods almost exactly. North Korea in the past focused primarily on acquiring nuclear weapons to consolidate power and establish international presence. There has been little shift in this nuclear program philosophy.

The significant point of analysis when looking at past and present nuclear program development is how North Korea uses its program. In the past, with a completely non-existent to early-stage nuclear program, North Korea had little diplomatic leverage to convince or manipulate global powers to allowing them to further progress its program without penalty. It was for this reason that North Korea actively engaged in negotiating with the US and participating in large negotiations like the Six Party Talks.

This changed when North Korea harnessed the power to produce a nuclear weapon. Since it successfully detonated a nuclear device in 2006, North Korea's strategy became less focused on coexistence as a nuclear entity, and instead to achieving preeminence within the nuclear weapons community. Leaving the Six Party Talks in 2009, North Korea spent the next decade continually increasing the lethality of its strategic forces and provoking international condemnation of its provocative nuclear weapons development. North Korea can then be characterized as a country less concerned with defensive posture, and instead aimed at a more offensive mindset to evolve beyond its history of being subjected to international containment efforts.

## II. Kim Jong Un's Nuclear Policy

During Thanksgiving 2014, Sony Pictures lost access to its computer systems and email accounts. In addition, several terabytes worth of its media content was released for free online. A group calling themselves the Guardians of Peace (GOP) claimed responsibility for the hack. After an investigation, the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) determined that the GOP were actually a group of hackers from North Korea. Angry with the upcoming theatrical release of The Interview, a comedy depicting a US scheme to assassinate Kim Jong Un, North Korea retaliated, resulting in the temporary crippling of a major international film company. Months before the hack took place, a spokesman from North Korean Foreign Ministry commented on The Interview's future release saying, "If the United States administration tacitly approves or supports the release of this film, we will take a decisive and merciless countermeasure" (Segal, 51-52). While the retaliation for the release of The Interview was not nuclear, it underscores the general attitude of Kim Jong Un, i.e., that he is willing to be aggressive to achieve what he wants.

The grandson of Kim Il-sung and son of Kim Jong Il, Kim Jong Un took over as Supreme Leader of North Korea in 2012, at the age of 27, after the death of his father. Before and shortly after this, several scholars, policy professionals, and leaders throughout the world questioned the young leader's ability to succeed in such a depressed and damaged country. Wasting no time in attempting to consolidate power, including the elimination of family rivals, and prove his ability to command a new path for North Korea, Kim Jong Un announced in March of 2013 a new strategic line for his country under the banner of byungjin, or parallel development. This strategic line foresaw the simultaneous pursuit of national armament and economic prosperity, a

“gun in one hand, and a sickle and hammer in the other.” The national armament was one of nuclear means (Panda, 16-17).

*Byungjin* was the beginning of Kim Jong Un’s nuclear development ambition, one that was inherited from his father and grandfather, but also fundamentally different. The nuclear policies of Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong Un had been conducted in such a way that the denuclearization of North Korea was a possibility based on diplomatic outcomes with interested nations. Kim Jong Un, however, believed that his march towards nuclear supremacy was the only way for his country to succeed moving forward, and for him the possibility of denuclearization was a moot point.

During 2016, North Korea under Kim Jong Un’s leadership began a period of exponential development in its strategic arsenal. It conducted their first hydrogen bomb detonation since 2006, launched several long-range missiles, claimed that its scientists had successfully developed a miniaturized warhead with nuclear capability, and conducted submarine ballistic missile tests aimed at circumventing air defense capabilities in South Korea (Chull & Cohen, 114-115).

At the conclusion of this period, instead of asking for economic assistance in exchange for a pause or thawing of nuclear development, a tactic that would have characterized his father’s strategy, Kim Jong Un sought to double down on his progress and provocation. Even with a new set of economic sanctions imposed by UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2321, Kim Jong Un held multiple rallies in Pyongyang to celebrate the remarkable progress North Korea had achieved in its pursuit of nuclear ascendancy, showcasing in real time the weapons that had been developed. In the spring of 2017, North Korea test fired a new rocket engine designed to power some of his new line of nuclear missile technology (Panda, 20).

Kim Jong Un's nuclear policy diverged from that of his predecessors. Whereas Kim Il-sung's and Kim Jong Il's was primarily aimed at economic or diplomatic gains, Kim Jong Un's has seemingly been grounded in weapon parity and anti-US rhetoric. For years, North Korea had been in the shadow of the US from the standpoint of militaristic capability, unable to achieve the same technological achievement as its Western rival. If the *byungjin* strategy of Kim Jong Un had shown anything, it was that North Korea was no longer an amusement piece for the United States, and its nuclear threat had become very real (Panda, 21-23).

Unlike his father and grandfather, Kim Jong Un's chief goal has been to build a strategic force that could increase national might and prestige, as opposed to one that would only serve as a bargaining chip for foreign aid and assistance. At this point, diplomatic affairs concerning North Korean nuclear matters took a dramatic turn. North Korea's long-standing method of engineering a crisis and then scaling it back once it had acquired resources, turned into a practice of engineering a crisis to show that it had the military might and capability to stand peer-to-peer with other nuclear equipped states.

The urge to find parity likely has a strong correlation to the national independence goal. Korea has long sought the support of others to hold up its economic, political, and societal needs. Unreliable assistance from China and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s has caused varying levels of hardship for North Korea. Kim Jong Un has likely tried to profit from these shortcomings, and during his first few years of leadership set his sights on developing a North Korean strategy that would be bold and aggressive with an aim of releasing North Korea from its dependency on others. Nuclear weapons could carry this strategy far.

### **III. 2017-2019: Fury to Détente, back to Fury**

Kim Jong Un's strategy of nuclear success to national prosperity culminated in 2017. In addition to successfully testing its first thermonuclear device in early September 2017, North Korean heightened provocations through multiple ballistic missile tests, many of which involved new missiles that had been engineered with advanced rocket technology capable of striking targets in the continental US (Sang-Hun, 2017). Making matters worse, Kim Jong Un and US President Donald Trump engaged in a political insult match that threatened to ignite an increasingly volatile situation.

While these provocations served to further Kim Jong Un's strategy of advancing military technology, the cost of his actions started to manifest themselves in North Korea's economy. Already being punished by multiple sanctions imposed by the UNSC and other states in years leading up to 2017, new UNSC resolutions 2371, 2375, and 2379, further restricted North Korea's access to resources and put it in an even more dire economic situation (Davenport, 2018). At the end of 2017, North Korea may have realized finally that its aggressive campaign since the introduction of *byungjin* may have finally reached a point at which it could no longer be sustained.

On 1 January 2018, Kim Jong Un gave his customary New Year's Day address to North Korea. But instead of his by now standard tone filled with calls for aggression against the US and furthering the philosophy of self-reliance, Kim Jong Un shifted course entirely, setting a different vision for North Korea in 2018. "The prevailing situation demands that now the north and the south improve the relations between themselves and take decisive measures for achieving a breakthrough for independent reunification without being obsessed by bygone days. No one can present an honourable appearance in front of the nation if he or she ignores the

urgent demands of the times” (“Kim Jong Un’s 2018 New Year’s Address”, 2018). This statement, and similar ones throughout his 2018 New Year’s Address, seemed to suggest that North Korea had met some sort of threshold that was forcing it into a new strategic direction.

Thanks to a warm reception from South Korea during the 2018 Winter Olympics, North Korea entered the international spotlight with a positive disposition, followed by several diplomatic exchanges and summits between South and North Korea through the spring of 2018. Then, on June 12, 2018, the US formally decided to enter the diplomatic exchanges between the two Koreas, and US President Donald Trump met with North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un in Singapore, marking the first time a former or present US President had met with North Korea’s top leader since 2009.

The primary focus of the historic meeting centered around the future of North Korea’s nuclear program. While there were questions about what the summit accomplished, some observers now viewed several items of diplomatic significance as being attainable, including de-escalation of military action, and a nuclear deal in exchange for economic relief and support (Friedman, 2018). No doubt 2018 had been a tremendous diplomatic year for the Korean Peninsula, not just for US-South Korea-North Korea relations, but for the entire world. Whether it was easing of tensions in Northeast Asia (NEA) that would have dramatic effects on Japan and China, or the UN not needing to devote enormous attention in containing a crisis scenario in North Korea, there was excitement among some observers for what this *détente* may hold for the future.

Enter 2019. “Obviously we have not made as much progress as we would have hoped at this point, but let me be absolutely clear: We have not given up.” Steven Biegun, the US’s North Korean envoy, stated this to a room of US and South Korean officials in December 2019,

capping a year where some saw the diplomatic gains of 2018 fizzling (Friedman, 2019). With a new high in North Korean ballistic missile tests, personal insults resuming between the US President and the North Korea Supreme Leader, possible activity at North Korea's nuclear sites, and even North Korea politicians claiming denuclearization negotiations "dead", 2019 seemed to be pivoting back to escalating tensions.

The US-North Korea Hanoi Summit of February 2019 raised hopes of a change in this trajectory to regain the political momentum achieved in 2018. The summit looked to be a major chance to continue solidifying the 2018 diplomatic gains with North Korea denuclearization, but at closer glance it may have had the opposite effect. It started with no clear vision for what the two leaders (Trump and Kim) would try to accomplish. Victor Cha, a US official who has dealt with North Korea negotiations since the George W. Bush administration, commented that "We went into that [Hanoi] meeting with our two leaders with no clarity at all on what they would say on the nuclear side," additionally adding "that was when I got really worried" (Friedman, 2019).

This ambiguity and lack of intent led to a diplomatic failure. North Korea put forth the first proposal - to dismantle the Yongbyon nuclear facility in exchange for an easing of economic sanctions. The US quickly countered with a demand that North Korea completely dismantle its nuclear program with the promise of total economic sanctions relief. Each was undeniably unhappy with the other's proposal, with North Korea wanting a staged approach to denuclearization, while the US seemed to be growing impatient and wanted immediate results. Coupled with President Trump's failure to attend the planned lunch with Kim Jong Un, North Korea felt scorned and had lost face with the international community. What has followed since have been failed attempts by the US to engage and continue a diplomatic working relationship



with North Korea and a US strategy of maximum pressure looming once more on the horizon (Friedman, 2019).

The nature of the political exchanges among North Korea, South Korea, and the US from 2017 through 2019 further supports the assessment that North Korea's nuclear program is a means to an end. Even though Kim Jong Un attempted to break the cycle of crisis engineering designed to bring about economic support from certain international stakeholders through an aggressive nuclear strategy, his capitulation in the face of enormous economic pressure finally manifested in 2018.

The arc of events of 2017 through 2019 are reminiscent of the events of 2006 through 2009, when North Korea detonated its first nuclear device, became a Six Party Talks diplomatic partner accepting of change if the conditions were right, before dissolving the commitments they had made and resuming nuclear operations. In a similar fashion, at the end of 2017 North Korea felt that it had hit a barrier, likely economic, so it attempted to achieve diplomatic success through negotiation before hitting another point at which it assessed that returning to its nuclear development would be in their best interest.

The pattern of US-North Korea relations, characterized by crisis, diplomacy, and severing of ties, each ended in a North Korean head-of-state transition of power, and subsequent change in nuclear strategy. The US-North Korea diplomacy of the early 1990s ended in no progress being made on the nuclear issue and power transitioned from Kim Il-sung to Kim Jong Il's. The 2006 North Korean nuclear detonation and subsequent Six Party Talks also made no progress on the nuclear issue, with Kim Jong Un assuming power in 2012. Coming out of this recent diplomatic nuclear exchange, all things remaining constant, there is reason to believe that North Korea's nuclear approach will change to account for lessons learned from the events of 2017-

2019. However, there is little reason to believe that North Korea's primary nuclear objectives of defense, offense, diplomatic leverage, and prestige will be altered.

### **Section Three: North Korea's Nuclear Future**

#### **I. North Korea's Need for a More Stable Economy**

For North Korea to be able to continue the advancement of its nuclear program, it must build a sustainable and reliable economy. The North Korean economy of Kim Il-sung was defined by help from his Soviet Union counterparts, and Kim Jong Il created an entirely new government model to navigate through a devastating famine without Soviet support. In both cases, the prevailing factor contributing to economic success or failure was outside support.

Kim Jong Un's economic plan is centered around *byungjin* and the alignment of economy and national defense, with each supporting the other. The number one priority in *byungjin* lies the development of a nuclear force capable of rivaling other declared nuclear states. However, the nuclear development should be thought of as second in priority to the economy, as a weak economy will produce a weak or non-existent nuclear force for North Korea.

Tak Sung Han and Jeon Kyung Joo, researchers at the Korea Institute for Defense Analysis, identified in 2014 several aspects integral to North Korea's *byungjin* economic philosophy in supporting its nuclear ambitions. First, a continuous and constant flow of nuclear research and development into its technology coupled with nuclear materials critical in the manufacture of nuclear weapons. Second, a strong domestic market and industrial complex able to support a built-up strategic force. Third, development of a more efficient and self-sustaining conventional military, so that more resources can be pooled into its strategic military. Fourth, marked improvements to the national power grid for the purposes of supplying the various laboratories, plants, factories, and military bases important in the development of nuclear weapons. Fifth, agricultural output increases. And finally, sixth, expanding its global trade partners outside of China (Han & Joo, 136-137).

To date, while North Korea has certainly made progress in some areas, there are still critical gaps it will need to address for it to continue and advance the state of its nuclear program. The most critical of the six domains identified by Tak Sung Han are: continuous flows of nuclear research and development materials, a strong domestic market and industrial complex, and an expansive list of global trade partners beyond China.

The task of gaining access to and retaining nuclear research and materials will be the chief challenge of North Korea's future nuclear ambition. While North Korea has a nuclear arsenal capable of sustaining its limited strategic force, its advancement will require new technology that can increase the mobility, reliability, potency, precision, and survivability of nuclear weaponry. Currently, these advancements are being obstructed by several UNSC resolutions that ban North Korea from developing and delivering nuclear payloads, in addition to nuclear weapons themselves ("North Korea's Nuclear Weapons and Missile Programs", 2021). In the meantime, North Korea will likely continue to rely on black market and illegal activity to develop and attain nuclear weapons and materials.

Despite the ambitions of the byungjin policy, North Korea continues to suffer from a constrained and dysfunctional domestic economy. Globally, North Korea is considered one of the least economically-free countries of the world. Several aspects of North Korean economic policy are state controlled. Without a functioning judiciary, corruption and bribery are rampant. With no effective tax system, North Korea acts as a large conglomerate as opposed to a robust nation of productive economic policies. With no entrepreneurial activity and a state-controlled monetary system, North Korea is unable to foster economic activity to lift itself from dependence on international support. A reliance on the military establishment and economic sanctions imposed by rival nations makes any meaningful trade or foreign investment unlikely in the short-

term (“North Korea Economic Freedom Index”, 2021). The bottom line is that due to North Korea’s continued perception of needing complete control of all aspects of societal economic and political activity, North Korea has a low chance of creating a new and invigorated private sector that will move their nuclear program forward.

Beyond acquiring nuclear material and advancing domestic economic sectors, establishing new relationships with international partners will be important to build its economy. China continues to be the primary benefactor of North Korea, contributing to \$5.26 billion worth of trade in 2017 (Albert, 2019). However, the cost of sustaining and advancing a nuclear program is high. For North Korea, an estimate by South Korean officials puts the cost between \$1 to \$3 billion, set to increase with each advancement in the strategic program (“Less than one aircraft carrier? The cost of North Korea’s nukes”, 2017). With a GDP of \$18 billion in 2019, the cost of such a program will be enormous and could lead to negative setbacks in other sectors of North Korea’s economy (“North Korea GDP.”).

To offset this, North Korea may try and establish relationships with other global trade partners. Outreach of this nature was seen in the 2018, when North Korea launched a massive campaign to project itself diplomatically through participation in the 2018 Winter Olympics, and several summits between South Korea and the US. However, North Korea’s global presence has been limited, with significant progress in diplomacy being overshadowed by the testing of short new range missile technology in 2019. There is little indication that this will change in the near-term as the world focuses on COVID-19 pandemic recovery. For now, North Korea will need to rely on China for the bulk of its economic partnership, limiting its ability to support advancing its nuclear program.

Overall, the economic situation in North Korea will be critical for advancing its nuclear program. However, based on the current situation involving restricted access to nuclear materials and technology, an unwillingness to progress its economic policies, and strained relationships with the global community, North Korea's economic outlook is negative. Due to this, North Korea's nuclear program, from an economic standpoint, is unlikely to progress beyond its present status.

## **II. Rebuilding of the North Korea – Chinese Relationship**

China continues to be the main benefactor for North Korea, both from an economic and military standpoint. This relationship has endured over time, due primarily to the strategic situation China shares with North Korea. Should North Korea capitulate and collapse, either through its own created destruction (through economic or political mismanagement) or a US-led military coalition, China would lose a significant buffer to rejecting Western influence in Asia.

Any mutual benefits that China might gain from relationship with North Korean have been undermined, however, due to North Korea's goal of achieving a capable nuclear force. Chinese President Xi Jinping declared in 2013 that "nuclear weapon development is a serious threat to peace and security in not only the Korean Peninsula but Northeast Asia." Therefore, China has had to overcome the herculean effort of balancing North Korean support and condemnation at the same time. According to Wenzhi Song and Sangkeun Lee, despite North Korea's historic provocative actions related to nuclear ambitions, "China sends a strong warning before North Korea's provocations, including a nuclear test, and then harshly condemns North Korea after provocations. Not long after, however, China resumes dialogue with North Korea and tries to recover their relationship" (Song and Lee, 21-22).

However, since Kim Jong Un took the leadership mantle of North Korea in 2012, the NK-China relationship has increasingly deteriorated. Liu Ming characterizes this degraded relationship by saying “Since taking power, Kim Jong-un had conducted more than 85 missile tests and four nuclear tests, with one missile test having occurred during China’s One Belt and One Road summit in 2017 and one while China was hosting a BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) summit in the same year. With resentment toward these tests and more pressure from the US, China actively cooperated with the US in calling for harsher sanctions on North Korea, leading to the cutting of coal and other imports from the DPRK.” While the situation surrounding China and North Korean relations did improve during 2018 and 2020, the COVID-19 global pandemic may serve as another obstacle in further repairing this relationship (Ming, 68-72).

Throughout the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, North Korea consistently reported that COVID-19 was under control and the virus was non-existent within its border. These types of reports can be hard to validate. If indeed North Korea achieved no coronavirus cases it was likely due to harsh quarantine enforcement regulations.

Part of these harsh enforcement regulations was the closure of North Korea’s border with China, a move that would almost be certain to place a strain on diplomatic relations. Tourism is another major sector that will have been hit by the response to COVID-19 in North Korea. With many other economic outlets being inaccessible to North Korea, it had invested heavily in tourism, specifically with China. COVID-19 all but closed off this avenue of economic growth, leading to multiple facility closures on the China – North Korea border. In March of 2020, Kim Jong Un sent a personal letter and cash gift to Chinese President Xi Jinping to stabilize their

relationship but based on regional responses from other Northeast Asian countries (Cambodia keeping its borders open with China, etc.), this gesture may have had little impact (Park, 2020).

If North Korea wants to continue to develop its nuclear weapons program, it must maintain and further cultivate a positive working relationship with China. As discussed in the previous section, North Korea receives a tremendous amount of economic aid from China. But more important than economic aid is the political and diplomatic shield China provides to North Korea from the US and its allies. If it wants to maintain its nuclear program, North Korea cannot afford to lose Chinese support, even if Chinese support is a mix of pressure to denuclearize and economic stabilization. As the world moves out of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea will likely try to reengage with China, through diplomatic dialogue and senior leadership visits, hoping to regain political strength that will be needed for their future nuclear program advancement.

### **III. North Korea as an International Partner**

North Korea's history is in part defined by isolationism and Juche philosophy. Its presence on the international scene as either a partner or diplomatic stakeholder in global affairs is limited. Historically, North Korea is often the focal point of international disputes, requiring discourse among the world's most powerful nations to conclude pressing affairs that see them as the culprits igniting an incident.

After the military quarrels in 2017 involving North Korea's nuclear capabilities, a dramatic shift occurred that changed the landscape of international discourse between the US and North Korea. Specifically, after having tested several increasingly lethal nuclear devices, showcasing new ballistic missile capabilities, and proving themselves to be a serious nuclear threat, North Korea initiated the process of negotiating directly as opposed to using a mediator



on their behalf to begin the process. North Korea was willing and capable of establishing an international presence needed to extend influence beyond the reaches of North East Asia.

Should North Korea plan to advance a nuclear program beyond where it currently stands, it will need to cultivate international outreach and diplomacy. This process starts at the economic level, with markets. Currently, North Korea's economy is very slowly moving from state control towards privatization. As previously mentioned in this paper, a strong domestic market and industrial sector will be needed to progress North Korea's economy to a point where nuclear program advancements are feasible. Expanding foreign capital and networks will be important for these endeavors. According to Son Daekwon, under certain market reforms Kim Jong Un has initiated during his rule, conditions have been created in which access to global information for North Koreans has increased, citizen shifts from state distribution systems to the market for economic stabilization have occurred, and foreign trade volume has risen. While there is risk in the balance between ideological and economic appeal, Kim Jong Un will likely further develop national markets through relationship building with global trade partners, hoping to improve North Korean productivity and by extension increase nuclear program development (Daekwon, 15-18).

North Korea will likely also continue to pursue negotiation. The diplomatic events of 2018 and 2019 showed North Korea, if nothing else, that being an engaging player on the international stage can be rewarding. Son Daekwon sees two possible scenarios from North Korea continuing to use the negotiating table. First, he believes North Korea might eventually denuclearize in exchange for total or substantial economic sanctions relief. Second, North Korea could buy time for itself to further consolidate political and military power while also using diplomatic gains to distribute private goods to North Koreans and make them less dependent on

the market. In either case, the nuclear program is the focal point. In the unlikely scenario of North Korea denuclearizing, the international community would have to make major concessions. In the situation where North Korea negotiates merely for procrastination purposes, an economic relief and international recognition is created, but nuclear force development continues. (Daekwon, 21-23).

Regardless of the route taken, simply coming to the negotiating table and establishing international relationships supports North Korean interests. With Chinese relations at a low point, a worldwide pandemic calling for global cooperation in its mitigation, and inter-Korean diplomacy of 2018 and 2019 still fresh, North Korea likely will aim to increase international outreach for the purposes of aid and economic relief, potentially to fuel their nuclear program ambitions further.

## **Section Four: US Options for Peacefully Resolving North Korea's Nuclear Ambition**

### **I. Moving North Korea Away from a Non-Integrating Gap State Identity**

In Thomas P.M. Barnett's book, The Pentagon's New Map, Barnett classifies two distinct types of states within the world: the functioning core and the non-integrating gap. Because of globalization and international cooperation following World War II, he argues that the functioning core became states within the world regions of North America, Western Europe, and Japan. Conversely, the areas of Africa, the Caribbean Rim, the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and several areas of central and South Asia were identified as the non-integrating gap. For the non-integrating gap regions, he assigned this designation of primarily because of what he saw as rejection towards globalization and rejection of its cultural content flows (Barnett, 2-4).

With a well-oiled propaganda machine rejecting of outside culture, limited access to the international market, and a government philosophy fixed on military control and the denying of many individual freedoms, North Korea fits nicely into Barnett's definition of a non-integrating gap state. A key to the continued development of North Korea's nuclear program has been its status as a non-integrating gap state. The ability to limit international meddling into its national affairs and the controlling of government institution priorities has enabled North Korea to hard press the nuclear issue as a top national strategy priority. If the US wishes to successfully mitigate North Korea's nuclear program peacefully, then it must create a strategy aimed at shifting its mindset away from gap state to core state.

At a micro level, this will involve engagements between the US and North Korea aimed at shifting perspective, specifically, establishing programs that enable the controlled and limited exchange of culture, ideas, and technology. Andrei Lankov highlights that this approach has

historical precedent as a tool to change a national culture over time. In 1958, a program was initiated between the Soviet Union and US that involved the academic exchange of university students. Two of the four students from the exchange, Oleg Kalugin and Alexandr Yakovlev, went on to be impactful leaders who changed the landscape of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Kalugin openly challenged the Komitet Gosudarstvennoy Bezopasnosti's (KGB) role as a political watchdog and transformed it into a legitimate intelligence and counterintelligence service. Yakovlev became a close ally of Mikhail Gorbachev, becoming a major architect in the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Both historical figures credit their time as students in the US to explain why their worldview became divergent from the Soviet Union's (Lankov, 244-246).

Lankov further describes this through the example of the Kaesong Industrial Zone. While the Kaesong Industrial Zone acts as a beneficial economic factor for North Korea and South Korea, when considering the issue of changing the mindset and culture of North Korea, it acts more as a transformative vessel for 150,000 to 200,000 North Korean laborers. Some observers hope that with North Korean exposure to new technologies, ideas, and public interactions, a promotion and expansion of relationships will take place overtime and lead to a more beneficial relationship North Korea shares with the international community. While outreach of this nature has the potential to reward North Korea's elite in the short-term, it equally may loosen their grip on power in the long-term through societal change (Lankov, 246-248).

At the macro level, for North Korea, gap state to core state transition will likely involve the balancing of global resources. Using Barnett's proposition that globalization conformity is the key to transforming gap states into core states, then labor, energy, money, and security will all need to flow freely throughout the international system from states where these variables are plentiful to areas where they are not (Barnett, 197-198). In the case of North Korea, the

resources in abundance are labor and security, in that that they have a sizeable and capable work force and military (“North Korea: Labor Force.”) (Albert, 2020). In terms of money and energy, however, North Korea is deficient. As this paper has already covered, the economic and energy situation are persistent challenges North Korea will need to overcome if it intends to advance certain national objectives.

It is therefore imperative that the US find ways to link money and energy resources to North Korea, without allowing them to be diverted to its nuclear program. In both situations where there is resource gain, a positive outcome for the US goal of North Korea denuclearization is increasingly likely. Countries with more access to energy are less wasteful and can therefore generate more production to fuel national economic growth. In turn, wealthy countries are more likely to sway politically towards democracy as the concentration of wealth and power flows more freely between citizens, as opposed to being concentrated in a single location (Barnett, 200-201).

By developing a plan for engagement and resource allocation, the US can degrade North Korea’s ambition of nuclear superpower status, primarily through the application of public sentiment. A more culturally aware population in conjunction with a population that is performing well in terms of standard of living will offset a national belief that a nuclear program is necessary for the advancement of North Korea. The most obvious risk in this approach is both ensuring North Korea uses the resources given to them for economic prosperity and providing convincing data that this course of action is in the best interest of the Kim regime.

## **II. Influencing China to Commit to a Non-Nuclear North Korea**

As China’s economic influence throughout Asia grows, so will its leverage in diplomatic and military affairs. China’s power is widely seen as rising, able to challenge the relative

singular super-power status the US maintained for several years following the end of the Cold War. By restructuring its economy, building a new middle class, and raising a military that now seeks to dominate South East Asia, China is no longer a peripheral state that can be ignored from a global stakeholder standpoint (Shambaugh, 39).

With this rise in power, China is positioned to be even better able to challenge North Korea's nuclear ambitions. US strategic interests must pivot towards China and their role in the peaceful dissolving of North Korea's nuclear program. This strategy will need to consider three core factors: 1) breaking down the longstanding historical and ideological ties China shares with North Korea, 2) minimizing short-term Northeast Asia US presence to rebuild the current state of US-Sino relations, and 3) a strengthening of the existing defense alliance between the US, Japan, and South Korea to coerce China from pursuing North Korean relations.

China and North Korea maintain their relationship as military and economic partners. While this relationship is most beneficial to North Korea, it also provides China with a regional buffer, keeping this strong relationship. However, as this paper has already highlighted, China's patience for North Korea's nuclear ambitions is thinning. Making matters worse, the persistent challenge of North Korean refugees flowing into China and the COVID-19 pandemic has only exasperated the China-North Korea relationship. The US should therefore engineer a new diplomatic campaign that is synonymous with a prosperous and secure Northeast Asia, with China being integral to this vision.

Should the US succeed in restructuring the working Chinese-North Korean relationship through political dialogue aimed at regional stability, China would be instrumental in bringing North Korea back to the negotiating table on its nuclear program. Through the restructuring of energy resources and consumer goods agreements, clamping down on criminal activity which

raises economic revenue for North Korea, and threatening to pursue new sanction efforts through the United Nations, China could be influential in creating immense pressure that would likely cause North Korea's capitulation on its nuclear ambition. While the US would most likely need to be amenable to new dialogue on the future security situation on the Korean Peninsula and the deployment of US military assets throughout Japan and South Korea, achieving a restructured Chinese viewpoint on their relationship with North Korea would be a major step towards North Korea denuclearization (Mullen, et al, 27-29).

Before the US can attempt to convince China that its relationship with North Korea must change, US-China relations must first improve. Although there are economic and trade disputes eroding US-Sino relations, it is arguably more characterized by security concerns. Since 2012, China has made marked improvements to its naval, ground force, and strategic weapon presence throughout Asia. This has undermined US interests while also challenging its strategic lines of effort within the Indo-Pacific region.

This grim security situation shared by the US and China extends to other Asian countries. While Vietnam, the Philippines, and South Korea all have diplomatic connections to the US and China, their commitments change depending on political factors at any given time. To deter North Korea's growing ballistic missile threat, in 2017 the US deployed the Terminal High Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system to South Korea. China quickly condemned this move, likely due to exploitation opportunities the THAAD could have on Chinese weapons systems. This then led to a 2018 agreement by the US and South Korea to allow South Korea to retain command of its wartime forces by the year 2022 should a conflict scenario break out on the Korean Peninsula, undermining US security agreements within the region.

Similarly, in 2012, the Philippines submitted South China Sea disputes to the UN Permanent Court of Arbitration, with strong encouragement from the US. The disagreements were primarily over fishing waters that both China and the Philippines claimed, leading to military naval blockades and heated diplomatic exchanges between the two countries. The UN court ruled in favor of the Philippines, following which China imposed harsh economic restrictions on the Philippines. This prompted Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte to reverse South China Sea policy cooperation with the US in 2016. Following the decision, China restored economic ties with the Philippines (Ross, et al, 52-54).

In both cases, US or Chinese interference on a political issue was maintained as a constant factor. If the US wants to rebuild a working relationship with China, a first step must be rethinking its approach to Asian affairs. US diplomatic hegemony can no longer be counted on as a primary course of action to navigating political issues throughout Asia, as they will almost always conflict with China's growing regional influence. In the short-term, to successfully find common ground on the North Korean nuclear issue, the US may consider restructuring its Northeast Asia priorities to deescalate disputes with China. This may lead to an opening in renewed dialogue between the US and China and cultivate mutually led efforts to alleviate the North Korean nuclear issue.

If degrading short-term strategic priorities in Northeast Asia is not a viable option based on national concern of long-term drawbacks, the US could decide to increase security cooperation with South Korea and/or Japan to force China into cooperating on the North Korean nuclear issue. While Japan already benefits from a strong military presence from the United States, increased spending on defense goods (ie, equipment, personnel, etc.) could increase the security situation of Northeast Asia in favor of the United States.



South Korea's mutual relationship with China makes it a questionable partner with the US in terms of increased defense goods spending. As analyzed by Young Wan Goo and Seong-Hoon Lee, "In the context of North Korea's threat, Goo and Kim (2009) shows that South Korea is sensitive to the threat posed by North Korea but that South Korea does not consider China a significant threat even though Japan and the U.S. have recognized China as a serious threat since the 1990s and the 2000s. Thus, South Korea has not considered the combined threat to be as important as the threat from North Korea" (Goo & Lee, 337). Being sensitive to their situation with China, South Korea is unlikely to actively pursue a relationship status that would communicate viewing two dangers to their security, that of a Chinese and North Korean nature.

Alternatively, Japan is likely to be a more interested party in increasing defense goods spending. From a Japanese perspective, Goo and Lee explain that "In response to threats from the China-North Korea alliance, South Korea did not increase military expenditures, whereas Japan and the United States showed positive responses to recent increases in the threat posed by this alliance. The recent Japanese reactions to threats from the China-North Korea alliance have been particularly sensitive, as compared with those during the earlier sample periods. This implies that Japan and the United States have begun to respond more actively to the recent increase in military expenditures spent by the China-North Korea alliance" (Goo & Lee, 338).

Japan's perception of China as a growing threat, combined with the view of North Korea as a mortal danger to national security may create a window of opportunity for US national security cooperation. By combining defense spending, increasing joint military exercises, and implementing intelligence sharing agreements, the US and Japan could establish a relationship that may threaten China's objectives throughout Asia. This action could result in China being

forced to advocate for US-led diplomatic efforts towards peacefully ending North Korea's nuclear program.

### **III. Restarting the Six Party Talks**

From a diplomatic standpoint, the Six Party Talks have been the closest multinational effort to peacefully resolving North Korea's nuclear program over the past twenty years. It is therefore an international commitment that should be supported as a future means to reinstitute cooperation at the global level on the highly destabilizing issue of North Korea's nuclear program. As commented by former US Secretary of State, "To prevent such an outcome (the violent dissolution of the North Korean regime) must be an essential part of Sino-American dialogue and of the Six Party Talks involving the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and the two Koreas" (Kissinger, 497).

The Six Party Talks began in 2003 and succeeded in producing frameworks for North Korean denuclearization through the September 19, 2005 Agreement and February 13, 2007 Joint Statement. These milestones achieved during the Six Party Talk process presented practical plans for North Korea to pursue in shutting down its nuclear program and integrating on the international issue of nuclear non-proliferation (Grzelczyk, 2). Unfortunately, the Six Party Talks ended in 2009, with North Korea avoiding any sort of reentry towards a similar process since.

If the US wishes to effectively engage North Korea on its nuclear program with support from international stakeholders within the region, then it must consider restarting the Six Party Talks. Transparency of the issue, objectives and motives of all parties involved, and cooperative measures important to a true denuclearization are easily achievable benefits of working in a

multinational format such as the Six Party Talks. Therefore, the question is less on what the US should do when in talks as opposed to how it gets to talking.

Trust and confidence with North Korea must be the first consideration for the US when attempting to restart the Six Party Talks. Virginie Grzelczyk argues that the US must make sanction relief concessions, and that there should be bilateral and multilateral efforts coordinated among interested nations involved in the North Korean nuclear issue. While this course of action comes with a degree of risk, as the actions of sanctions and pressure campaigns are primary US tools for undermining North Korean progress in their nuclear endeavors, trust and confidence will be of paramount importance to igniting a future Six Party Talks process (Grzelczyk, 12).

Another option the US can utilize in restating the Six Party Talk process is to expand the Six Party Talk membership to Europe. While not active members in the Six Party Talk process, European nations often serve as key diplomatic third parties for North Korea. If a European Union (EU) member, particularly one with no legacy issues in the Korean Peninsula and having strong political ties to North Korea, were included as member of the Six Party Talks, North Korea may be more inclined to participate in negotiations on the future of its nuclear program (Grzelczyk, 13).

Regardless of the means, reinstating the Six Party Talks will be of key importance to the US interests of peacefully negotiation the North Korean nuclear issue. In the short-term, US strategy must be set on engagement opportunities such with traditional Six Party Talk members and the possible inclusion of new ones. In the long-term, US strategy must be focused on past North Korean diplomatic process mistakes, ensuring a policy framework is established during and after a future Six Party Talks process that definitively establishes denuclearization.

## **Conclusion**

This paper critically examined the past, present, and future threat North Korea poses not just to the Korean Peninsula, but to global stability. While North Korea's nuclear ambition has always been a persistent threat, Kim Jong Un's march towards nuclear superpower realization has been nothing short of extreme. As such, the US and its allies' must now seriously consider moving up their denuclearization timetable based on the situation presented.

Having successfully tested one thermonuclear device in 2017 and having launched several long- and short-range ballistic missiles within the past three years, North Korea is poised to continue to upgrade and advance their strategic military forces. However, North Korea has also shown itself to be pragmatic and amenable to international pressure, as demonstrated by their 2018-2019 diplomatic exchanges. Contrary to common public opinions, North Korea is rational, to a degree, and often acts in a way that either has historical precedent or is imbued in the greater concept of a national balancing act.

For these reasons, North Korea should not be considered a lost cause in terms of a US foreign or national security priority. In fact, the US has many tools at its disposal to engineer a peaceful resolution to the North Korean nuclear issue. By carefully navigating the ideological relationship between North Korea and China, repairing US-Sino relations, and organizing a return to the Six Party Talks process, the US can still achieve the exhaustive goal of denuclearizing North Korea. By denuclearizing North Korea, the US could set in motion other positive events, such as officially ending the Korean War, establishing a strong pro-Western relationship within the Indo-Pacific region, and stabilize a region that has for too long been the source of consternation and bewilderment.

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