



# How Should the ROK and the US Manage the North Korean WMD Issue to Promote and Shape the Satisfactory Unification of the Korean Peninsula?

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## Abstract

Reunification of the Korean Peninsula remains a heartfelt objective for the Korean people. Yet polls show declining South Korean support for reunification, particularly amongst the younger generations. Belligerent

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North Korean behavior and resistance to reform, as well as growing South Korean concerns about its national economy, have constrained progress or even enthusiasm for reunification.

Korean unification would require either fundamental reform by North Korea or the collapse of the regime. Unfortunately, Kim Jong-un has clearly demonstrated that he will be as resistant to reform as his predecessors were. The North Korean leadership may have changed two years ago, but it is quite clear that the policies haven't.

As for collapse, the North Korean regime has shown remarkable resilience, belying repeated predictions of imminent demise from domestic and international threats.

Peaceful unification would first require meaningful reconciliation through improved inter-Korean engagement. President Park Geun-hye is attempting another variant of South Korean engagement with North Korea through her trust-building policy.

Pyongyang has also made clear that it has no intention of abandoning its nuclear weapons. Kim Jong-un demonstrated his willingness to escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula to dangerous levels in early 2013, threatening nuclear attacks against the United States and South Korea. Although North Korea is currently in its "charm offensive" phase, it is only a matter of time before the regime inevitably reverts to provocations.

While Kim Jong-un has maintained his father's policies, he appears to be implementing them in a more brutal, volatile, and unpredictable way. Since Kim Jong-un ascended to power, North Korean actions don't appear directed toward achieving identifiable objectives nor has he played the diplomatic card as skillfully as his father. While his father incrementally raised tensions to allow Washington and its allies time to buy their way back to the status quo, Jong-un simultaneously unleashes several threats

to no discernible purpose.

There is also a greater risk of miscalculation and escalation since Kim Jong-un lacks experience and may stumble across red lines that his predecessors would have known not to cross. Moreover, he may be unaware that South Korea is far more likely to respond to even a North Korean tactical attack than before.

US, South Korea, and Japanese willingness to resume nuclear negotiations with North Korea is minimal without a significant change in North Korean resistance to fulfill its denuclearization pledges.

The Obama Administration's response to North Korea's nuclear threats has been characterized by firm rhetoric and minimalist measures, in contrast to stronger punitive measures imposed on Iran which provided greater incentive for Tehran to eventually return to negotiations. Despite declaring that North Korea's nuclear weapons program was a "threat to the US national security and to international peace and security," President Obama has implemented a timid policy that only incrementally increase punishments on Pyongyang for its repeated defiance of the international community.

The United States and South Korea should have no illusions about Kim Jong-un. The North Korean threat -- always high -- has gotten worse under the young leader. North Korea now seems like a runaway train careening down the tracks with a volatile, unpredictable engineer pushing firmly forward on the throttle. There can be debate as to how to best respond to the situation. But there should be no debate as to how dangerous the situation could become.

## I . Introduction

Reunification of the Korean Peninsula remains a heartfelt objective for the Korean people. Yet polls show declining South Korean support for reunification, particularly amongst the younger generations. Belligerent North Korean behavior and resistance to reform, as well as growing South Korean concerns about its national economy, have constrained progress or even enthusiasm for reunification.

Korean unification would require either fundamental reform by North Korea or the collapse of the regime. Unfortunately, Kim Jong–un has clearly demonstrated that he will be as resistant to reform as his predecessors were. As for collapse, the North Korean regime has shown remarkable resilience, belying repeated predictions of imminent demise from domestic and international threats.

Peaceful unification would first require meaningful reconciliation through improved inter–Korean engagement. President Park Geun–hye is attempting another variant of South Korean engagement with North Korea through her trust–building policy.

We can be hopeful that this policy will induce Pyongyang to moderate its belligerent behavior and implement fundamental reform. However, as President Park has said, “it takes two hands to clap” and North Korea has undermined countless previous attempts by Seoul at dialogue with Pyongyang.

The United States has great respect for President Park and the alliance is perhaps the strongest it has ever been. Washington is supportive of President Park’s trust–building policy and hopes that its pragmatic offer of diplomacy based on the principles of conditionality, reciprocity, and transparency will be successful.

But, such attempts at building trust with Pyongyang must be built on a foundation of strong deterrent and defense capabilities to prevent further North Korean attacks. When reaching out to Pyongyang, as well as defending against North Korean threats, Washington and Seoul must implement coordinated policies based on strong mutual cooperation.

## II . Battle for Power, Not Policy in Pyongyang.

Korea watchers are debating whether Jang Song-taek's purge and execution reflects the strength or weakness of Kim Jong-un. Some experts perceive a weak, embattled Kim feeling forced to fend off challengers. But, it is more likely that the purge of hundreds of North Korean officials since 2011 shows Kim Jong-un is firmly in control and confident enough to remove even the senior-most strata of officials. Like his father and grandfather, Kim is playing rivals off against each other to eliminate real or perceived challengers.

Jang Song-taek was accused of plotting a coup to "overthrow the state [and] to grab the supreme power of our party and state." Perhaps. But had Jang wanted to grab the ring of power he would have had more success immediately after Kim Jong-il's death in December 2011. After Kim Jong-un acquired each of his father's six titles<sup>1)</sup> signifying control over the government, military, and party, it became increasingly more difficult for potential challengers to oust him.

It is more likely that the accusation of treason -- as well as the litany of his personal foibles of gambling, drugs, womanizing, pornography, and drinking -- were to undermine Jang's reputation and justify the execution.

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1) Supreme Commander of the KPA; First Secretary of the WPK Central Committee; Chairman of the WPK Central Military Commission; First Chairman of the DPRK National Defense Commission; Marshal of the DPRK; and Member of the Presidium of the WPK Politburo.

*No Reform or Policy Deviation.* Although Jang was often referred to as a “reformer” by the media, there is scant evidence that he or any hidden faction advocates implementing economic and political reform or moderating North Korea’s threatening behavior. Pyongyang created the perception of factions of hardliners and reformers as part of a “good cop/bad cop” strategy to elicit benefits during negotiations. As a Korean adage warns, “The same animal has soft fur and sharp claws.”

Kim Jong–un used the purge to make Jang the scapegoat for North Korea’s economic problems. Jang was described as controlling all major economic fields of the country and accused of scheming “to drive the economy of the country and people’s living into an uncontrollable catastrophe.” Jang was then able to be blamed for the disastrous currency revaluation of 2009, poor construction in Pyongyang, selling off of the Rason economic zone and precious resources at low prices, and creating “a great confusion in financial management system of the state.”

So much for the political and economic reform that some experts predicted Kim would implement, as they had similarly predicted about his father. The military court derided Jang’s “despicable true colors as (economic) reformist.”

Pyongyang has also made clear that it has no intention of abandoning its nuclear weapons. North Korea revised its constitution to enshrine itself as a nuclear weapons state. The leadership declared, “those who talk about an economic reward in return for the dismantlement of [North Korea’s] nuclear weapons would be well advised to awake from their daydream…Only fools will entertain the delusion that we will trade our nuclear deterrent for petty economic aid.”

While holding the world at bay, Kim Jong Un wages an internal war by relying on purges to eliminate real or imagined enemies and an extensive

gulag system to intimidate the populace. The North Korean leadership may have changed two years ago, but it is quite clear that the policies haven't.

### III. Concerns Over Regime Stability

Abysmal economic conditions, growing societal disparity, and increased access to outside information create conditions for potential unrest. But regime change is more likely due to a personal attack on Kim Jong-un by senior-level conspirators than from a popular revolutionary movement.

Reports of attempted assassinations and coups during Kim Jong-il's reign show the potential for a sudden event having a devastating impact on North Korean stability. The absence of an independent North Korean media or presence of foreign journalists prevent timely identification of growing social instability.

That said, Pyongyang has displayed a remarkable ability to withstand domestic and international threats. Regime change in the foreseeable future is unlikely due to the pervasiveness of North Korean security services, the lack of a viable opposition party or movement, and the state's absolute control over information sources.

What does Jang's purge suggest about the stability of North Korea? Some experts perceive a weak, embattled Kim feeling forced to fend off challengers. But it is more likely that Kim's purge of Jang – as well as hundreds of other officials since 2011 – shows that the North Korean ruler is firmly in control and confident enough to target even the most senior strata of power. Like his father and grandfather, Kim is playing rivals off against each other to eliminate real or perceived challengers.

## IV. Expect Rough Waters Ahead

The first several years of Kim Jong-il's official reign were relatively quiet and peaceful, at least in his treatment of the outside world. Later, he alternated provocations with charm offensives as part of a broader strategy to achieve diplomatic objectives, such as defining negotiating parameters or extracting maximum benefits for minimal concessions.

By comparison, Kim Jong-un's first two years of power has been filled with provocations and high tension, including two long-range missile launches, a nuclear test, vicious propaganda attacks on South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, and extremely high and unique new threats in early 2013.

Kim Jong-un demonstrated his willingness to escalate tensions on the Korean Peninsula to dangerous levels in early 2013, threatening nuclear attacks against the United States and South Korea. Although North Korea is currently in its "charm offensive" phase, it is only a matter of time before the regime inevitably reverts to provocations.

Kim Jong-un has maintained his father's policies but appears to be implementing them in a more brutal, volatile, and unpredictable way. If there was any lingering naive doubt that Kim would be just as merciless as his father and grandfather, it died along with Jang Song-taek. During his two years in power, Kim Jong-un has escalated the subjugation of the populace. He has increased public executions, expanded the gulags for political prisoners, and increased government punishment for people caught with information from the outside world.

Former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Kurt Campbell stated that Kim Jong-un was "dangerous, unpredictable, prone to violence, and with delusions of grandeur" as a teenager. Campbell added that China



“normally had the ability to engage North Korea, and control its destiny somewhat [but] that period has passed.” Campbell concluded that Kim Jong-un is taking North Korea “in a very dangerous direction.”<sup>2)</sup>

Since Kim Jong-un ascended to power, North Korean actions don't appear directed toward achieving identifiable objectives nor has he played the diplomatic card as skillfully as his father. While his father incrementally raised tensions to allow Washington and its allies time to buy their way back to the status quo, Jong-un simultaneously unleashes several threats to no discernible purpose. The collapse of the Leap Day Agreement only two weeks after its inception reflects an erratic and amateurish hand on the foreign policy tiller.

Kim Jong-un has not courted China and Russia as his predecessors had, nor even met with any world leaders. His eagerness to befriend Dennis Rodman while refusing to meet with either the president of Mongolia or the CEO of Google shows daft rather than deft judgment.

***Greater Risk of Miscalculation and Escalation.*** Kim Jong-un lacks experience and may stumble across red lines that his predecessors would have known not to cross. He may feel emboldened to commit rash acts since neither the US nor South Korea responded militarily in any significant way to previous North Korean acts of terrorism and war.

He may be unaware that South Korea is far more likely to respond to even a North Korean tactical attack than before. Driven by strong criticism over his failure to respond to the attack on Yeonpyeong Island, President Lee Myung-bak too steps to enhance South Korea's retaliatory capabilities.

President Lee loosened the military rules of engagement for the West Sea area to allow immediate and exponential retaliation. He also pushed the

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2) “Kim Jong-un Dangerous and Unpredictable,” Chosun Ilbo December 18, 2013 and Max Fisher, “Kim Jong Un's former classmates say he really is dangerous, unpredictable, prone to violence,” The Washington Post, December 16, 2013.

authority to respond down to a lower command echelon. South Korean officials commented that Seoul had replaced the previous 1:1 response ratio with a 3:1 attack ratio: i.e., that Seoul would attack three artillery batteries for every battery that fired on the South.

South Korean President Park Geun-hye has made her position clear, declaring, “In the case of any further North Korean provocations, I am prepared to activate all possible means within the boundaries of self-defense.” The South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that it would respond to a North Korean attack by “forcefully and decisively strik[ing] not only the point of origin of provocation and its supporting forces but also its command leadership.”<sup>3)</sup>

A Ministry of Defense official explained that, in the case of a tactical artillery strike in the West Sea, Seoul might attack the Fourth Corps regional command headquarters rather than simply targeting a few artillery batteries.<sup>4)</sup>

*North Korea Continues to Augment WMD.* Pundits, politicians, and policymakers often speculate on what impact “North Korea becoming nuclear” will have on US and South Korean policies. But why do we not assume North Korea already has a nuclear weapons and missile-delivery capability?

The United States Intelligence Community assessed in the 1990s that North Korea had developed 1–2 plutonium weapons. In November 2013, South Korean Defense Minister Kim Kwan-jin told the National Assembly that “We evaluate that North Korea can build a nuclear weapon using uranium.”

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3) Choe Sang-hu, “South Korea Pushes Back on North’s Threats,” The New York Times, March 6, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/07/world/asia/seoul-says-north-korea-leadership-could-be-target.html>.

4) Kim Kyu-won, “Seoul Pledges Retaliation to North Korea’s Threat to Cancel Armistice Agreement,” Hankroyeh, March 6, 2013, <http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/ENGISSUE/105/577002.html>.

A South Korean official commented that the July 2013 US–ROK Integrated Defense Dialogue concluded that Pyongyang had achieved the ability to load nuclear warheads onto ballistic missiles.

Military experts on South Asia unequivocally assess the Pakistan Ghauri missile is already nuclear capable. The first Ghauri missiles paraded by Pakistan were actually exported North Korea missiles. Since then, there has been extensive Pakistan/North Korean exchange on the plutonium and uranium nuclear weapons and missile programs.

In March 2013, South Korean Minister of Defense Kim Kwan-jin told the National Assembly that the Unha-3 [also known as Taepo Dong and KN-08] rocket had an estimated range of 10,000km and could have reached the US west coast. The US Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff James Winnefeld commented in March 2013, “We believe the KN-08 probably does have the range to reach the United States. The North Korean threat went just a little bit faster than we might have expected.”

## V. Dealing with North Korea's WMD Problem

US, South Korea, and Japanese willingness to resume nuclear negotiations is minimal without a significant change in North Korean resistance to fulfill its denuclearization pledges. Washington believes Pyongyang's current actions and declarations show the regime is unwilling to abide by its previous commitments and, therefore, Six Party Talks have no utility.

Pyongyang made abundantly clear shortly after Obama's inauguration in 2009 that the regime would not act any better toward the new president than it had toward George W. Bush. Obama's initial overtures were dashed by a series of North Korean provocations in the first half of 2009.

This led the administration to reverse policy and adopt stronger measures against North Korea. President Obama criticized the Bush Administration's over-reliance on punitive measures but his administration now brags it is has the toughest measures against North Korea (and Iran) in US history.

President Obama's second attempt at reconciliation - the February 2012 Leap Day Agreement - similarly collapsed, leaving the administration angry at Pyongyang's duplicity. As a result, the Obama Administration is willing to have President Park Geun-hye take the lead in reaching out to North Korea. Washington supports Park's trust politik policy which balances conditional engagement with firm deterrence measures.

*China is an impediment to progress.* In 2013, there was a growing perception amongst Washington's China watchers that Beijing had adopted a new, tougher policy against North Korea. The commentary suggested that Beijing had finally become sufficiently angry with its recalcitrant ally to be more willing to take tougher action and that Xi Jinping would pursue a different policy from his predecessors.

But most items that were presented as evidence of a new policy had been previously undertaken by Beijing, and often subsequently rescinded. For example:

- The Bank of China severed contact with North Korea's Foreign Trade Bank. The BoC and other Chinese banks previously did so in September 2005 and early 2006 in response to US action against Banco Delta Asia and private meetings with US officials.
- China did not deliver fuel oil to North Korea in February 2013. China also did not deliver fuel oil in February 2012, February 2011, and September 2006.
- Chinese government-affiliated Chinese think tanks increasing criticism of North Korea and questioning of Chinese policy toward Pyongyang.

Such criticism/

questioning has been observed for approximately five years.

- Beijing publicly criticizing North Korea for its actions. China, however, did not specify North Korea was the subject of its criticism, instead amorphously declaring ‘no nation should undermine peace and stability in northeast Asia.’
- Issuing Technical Bulletin #59. This is a welcome step, though it is the overdue implementation paperwork of actions required under UN Security Council Resolutions 1718 and 1874.

After Pyongyang shifted from threatening behavior in March and April 2013 to a resumed charm offensive, Beijing’s policy returned to its anodyne, value-neutral calls for all parties to refrain from provocations and return to negotiations. There is now less discussion amongst Washington experts over a changed Chinese policy.

## VI. Need For Enhanced Sanctions

Targeted financial measures and engagement—along with economic assistance, military deterrence, alliances, and public diplomacy—are diplomatic tools to influence the behavior of other nations. These tools can be employed in a range of options and combinations. Rather than being used in isolation, sanctions and engagement are most effective when integrated into a comprehensive strategy that engages all of the instruments of national power. Not fully utilizing any element of national power reduces the effectiveness of US foreign policy.

The US response to North Korea’s nuclear threats has been characterized by firm rhetoric and minimalist measures, in contrast to stronger punitive

measures imposed on Iran which provided greater incentive for Tehran to eventually return to negotiations.

President Barack Obama declared in 2013 that North Korea's nuclear weapons program was a "threat to the US national security and to international peace and security." The U.N. Security Council similarly warned that North Korea's nuclear and missile threats posed "a clear threat to international peace and security." In 2009, Obama had vowed that North Korean "belligerent, provocative behavior that threatens neighbors will be met with significant, serious enforcement of sanctions."

Yet despite these unambiguous warnings and unequivocal vows of resolute response, the United States continues to implement timid policies that only incrementally increase punishments on Pyongyang for its repeated defiance of the international community. The United States still pulls its punches when targeting financial measures against North Korea and its supporting entities, and the US has shied away from effective unilateral action since 2006.

At the time, critics derided the Banco Delta Asia law enforcement initiative as a neo-conservative attempt to undermine the six-party nuclear negotiations. Yet senior Obama Administration officials have characterized the initiative as having been "very effective" and argued that President George Bush's decision to rescind it was "a mistake that eased pressure on Pyongyang before it took irreversible steps to dismantle its nuclear program."

The Obama Administration stated that it "hopes to recreate the financial pressure that North Korea endured back in 2005 when [the United States] took the action against Banco Delta Asia." Yet, in March 2013, despite North Korea's repeated violations of U.N. resolutions, a State Department official commented that there was still room to increase sanctions on North Korea: "[W]e haven't maxed out, there is headroom."

By adopting a sanctions policy of timid incrementalism, the US squandered the opportunity to impede progress on North Korea's nuclear and missile programs more effectively and coerce compliance with U.N. resolutions. The regime has successfully weathered weak diplomatic responses to its provocations, weak international sanctions, and no military response to its two attacks on South Korea. As a result, Pyongyang feels that its own strategic patience policy can outlast that of its opponents.

The collective international finger-wagging and promises to be tougher the next time have allowed North Korea additional years to develop and refine its nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. The inability and unwillingness to impose more comprehensive sanctions has emboldened North Korea, Iran, and other nuclear aspirants to believe they can defy the world until they present their nuclear status as a *fait accompli*. North Korea also has felt no compunction about proliferating nuclear and chemical weapon technologies to Syria.

The United States should use its action against Iran as a model and impose the same severity of targeted financial measures against North Korea and the foreign entities that assist its nuclear and missile programs.

## VII. What the US Should Do

- ***Support South Korea taking the lead.*** Given the failure of its earlier attempts, there is little incentive for the Obama Administration to try to re-engage North Korea. The US should encourage South Korean attempts at engagement. Washington has a high comfort level with President Park, the result of her strong past support for the alliance and principled views toward North Korea. Washington should support both pillars of Park's policy: conditional outreach combined with strong

defenses against the spectrum of North Korean military threats.

- ***Resist the siren song to re-engage North Korea.*** Washington and Seoul repeatedly tried diplomatic overtures, but all were firmly rejected by Pyongyang. The Kim regime vowed never to abandon its nuclear weapons nor return to the Six-Party Talks. Another envoy would get the same message.
- ***Increase pressure on Pyongyang.*** The time for incremental responses and relying on the U.N. is past. The US should take action against North Korea's illegal activities; its nuclear and missile programs; and any complicit foreign individual, bank, business, or government agency. Regrettably, there is little inclination in the Obama Administration to take resolute action against North Korea for its repeated violations and provocations. Instead, the Administration appears to be satisfied with minimalist punishment delivered amid bold claims of “exceptional” measures that “significantly expand the scope of sanctions.”<sup>5)</sup>
- ***Press China to pressure Pyongyang.*** Beijing should be told that its reticence to join international pressure on North Korea is triggering the crisis that China seeks to avoid. Pyongyang has only been emboldened to ratchet up tensions still further, pushing Washington and its allies to take necessary military steps that Beijing does not want.
- ***Fully fund US defense requirements.*** It is unrealistic to think that the

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5) Ambassador Susan Rice, address to the United Nations, March 5, 2013, <http://www.unmultimedia.org/tv/unifeed/2013/03/un-dprk-9/>.



United States can cut defense spending by an additional \$1 trillion over the next decade and still maintain its current level of commitment. Shortchanging US defense spending may appear to provide short-term budgetary gains, but such gains will come at an unacceptable risk to America's armed forces, allies, and national interests in the Asia-Pacific.

- ***Do not back down on displays of resolve.*** Affirming US commitment to defending its allies should be clear and unequivocal. Obama Administration statements that US military moves were partly meant to forestall South Korea from responding to a North Korean attack send the wrong message.
- ***Encourage South Korea to improve relations with Japan.*** Washington should privately counsel Seoul and Tokyo to take steps to begin a reconciliation process by compartmentalizing contentious issues to enable forward-looking security policies. The US should also encourage Park and Abe to minimize the impact of strong nationalist emotions currently running rampant in their countries. A first step would be to create the political atmosphere necessary to enable the signing of the intelligence-sharing agreement that was canceled in June 2012.

## VIII. What Seoul Should Do

- ***Enhance South Korean defenses.*** Pyongyang's repeated violations of international law and military attacks undermined previous attempts at engagement. South Korea, in concert with the United States, should take steps to guard against North Korean nuclear, missile, and conventional force attacks.

- *Pursue conditional engagement with North Korea.* There is little expectation that another attempt at engagement will be successful, but even a failed effort by Park could be beneficial since it could undermine domestic critics who always seek to blame others for North Korea's belligerence and refusal to fulfill its commitments.
- *Defer North Korea peace treaty overtures until sufficient progress is achieved on denuclearization.* An inviolable precondition for such negotiations would be the inclusion of conventional force reductions and confidence-building measures such as prior notification of major military deployments, movements, and exercises.
- *Denounce North Korea's human rights abuses,* approve North Korean human rights legislation, call on Beijing to abandon repatriating North Korean defectors and allow visits by the U.N. rapporteur on North Korean human rights to investigate refugee conditions in northeast China, and encourage China, Mongolia, and Southeast Asian nations to facilitate travel by North Korean refugees.
- *Provide humanitarian aid* but the level of emergency food aid should be determined by international aid organization assessment of North Korean needs based on in-country inspections. Aid should be delivered directly to needy recipients rather than to the North Korean government and subject to rigorous monitoring requirements.
- *Impose punitive measures.* Seoul should target North Korean and other nations' individuals, banks, businesses, and government agencies that

are violating U.N. resolutions and international law. Doing so would increase the cost to North Korea if Pyongyang continues to defy the international community.

## IX. Conclusion

President Park Geun-hye has provided a realistic blueprint for engaging North Korea while protecting South Korea. Seoul should remain resolute in its requirements of conditionality, reciprocity, and transparency from Pyongyang. South Korea's outreach should be grounded in both strong national defenses and firm support from the United States.

There should be no doubt in the minds of America's allies and opponents that the United States will fulfill its treaty obligations to South Korea. While the Obama Administration has been stalwart in its rhetoric pledging an "Asia Pivot," it has not provided the military resources to implement such a strategy. Quite simply, there is no pivot, as no US forces withdrawn from Iraq, Afghanistan, or Europe will be redeployed to the Pacific. In fact, massive defense budget cuts threaten to undermine existing US capabilities.

The United States and South Korea should have no illusions about Kim Jong-un. The North Korean threat -- always high -- has gotten worse under the young leader. He is just as dangerous as his father -- and less predictable.

North Korea now seems like a runaway train careening down the tracks with a volatile, unpredictable engineer pushing firmly forward on the throttle. What awaits around the corner is unknown. The North Korean train could slow down due to numerous factors, or it could derail, causing enormous damage to itself and its surroundings. There can be debate as to how to best respond to the situation. But there should be no debate as to how dangerous the situation could become.

