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On April 18, 2017, Bruce Jones, director of the Brookings Foreign Policy Program, convened six Brookings experts—John Allen, Richard Bush, Robert Einhorn, Steven Pifer, Jonathan Pollack, and Evans Revere—with decades of diplomatic and military experience focused on North and South Korea, China, Japan, and nuclear and missile proliferation, to provide analysis and policy recommendations for addressing the ongoing threats posed by North Korea. The edited transcript below reflects their assessments of North Korean threats and motivations; potential escalatory scenarios; the interests of regional actors including China, Japan, and South Korea; and U.S. objectives and policy options going forward.

#### **DIRECTOR'S SUMMARY**

- Threats posed by the North Korean nuclear and missile programs must be front and center in U.S. national security decisionmaking.
- The United States and China should agree to seek to prevent the Korean Peninsula from becoming the object of U.S.-China military confrontation or conflict.
- A large-scale peninsular and regional conflict, involving hundreds of thousands of troops and potentially hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties, would likely ensue from a preemptive U.S. military strike on North Korea.
- The threshold for preemptive U.S. military action against North Korea should be the imminent launch of a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile directed at the United States or its allies.
- The United States should, in coordination with U.S. allies and China, significantly intensify economic, diplomatic, and other forms of pressure on North Korea and its leadership in order to compel Pyongyang to negotiate a near-term, verifiable freeze of its nuclear and missile programs, accompanied by a longterm North Korean commitment to denuclearization.
- Such a strategy would entail complex and carefully calibrated negotiations with North Korea, U.S. allies, and China, and therefore require unprecedented policymaking capacity and coordination across the U.S. government.

#### 1. ASSESSING NORTH KOREAN THREATS AND MOTIVATIONS

**BRUCE JONES:** Let's begin with the threat and try to separate out three issues: first, the nuclear threat posed by Pyongyang; second, the conventional threat; and third, the regime's intentions—what is driving these programs from the North Korean perspective?

**JONATHAN POLLACK:** The key threat underlying most of the recent debate is North Korea's ability to put a nuclear warhead on a missile—or some other means of delivery—and then how far it can travel. That's really what this is about. I tend to be in a minority position about the near-term likelihood of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) test. If I simply look over the pace of North Korea's missile activities over the last year and a half, which now exceeds three dozen, here is the conclusion I draw: When the North Koreans launch one of their tried and true missiles—in other words, Nodongs or Scuds, which rely on technology dating to World War II—they have a very good success rate.

What really animates much deeper concern are the solid fuel missiles that provide a much more movable, survivable deterrent that can be launched quickly. Now, much to my surprise and to the surprise of others, some of these launches have been successful—you'll recall some of these landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone. But the question really, as illustrated by the military parade in Pyongyang on April 15, is that the North would like us to believe that they will test an ICBM test very soon. They suggested in January that they can launch an ICBM any time they choose, which is what has triggered so much of the higher anxiety. But we are now in the middle of April, and there has been no such launch.

Now you could say that's because of dire warnings from the new administration, or one from China, but those kinds of warnings in the past usually result in the North Koreans saying "F-you, here's the missile." But it's not easy. Missiles are very, very delicate things. And a solid fuel missile is different. They want to give that impression they are there. We saw all the canisters. But we actually didn't see any new missiles. Without saying that this is all deception and denial, we at least have to allow the possibility that a lot of things that rolled down the boulevard were prototypes. My point simply is that they haven't done yet what they claim they want to do.

**EVANS REVERE:** I agree with a lot of that, but with a couple footnotes: Point one, they have managed to put two semi-functioning objects into space. That's something. Point two, they have carried out engine tests for long-range systems—and Kim Jong Un was present for them—that would provide capability for either a space launch vehicle or an ICBM.

So, if in September or October of this year, they manage to marry the engine with the launch vehicle, which they already know works, and put a dummy warhead aboard and drop it into the northeast Pacific Ocean—or off the coast of Alaska in international waters—and then simultaneously do a 15-20 kiloton underground nuclear test, that's a message we will have to pay attention to. So I agree they haven't done the deed yet—but they seem to be making progress on critical components of the system.

**JONATHAN POLLACK:** Do you think that Kim overpromised? In other words, he claims they are ready, but they may not be ready?

EVANS REVERE: It's possible.

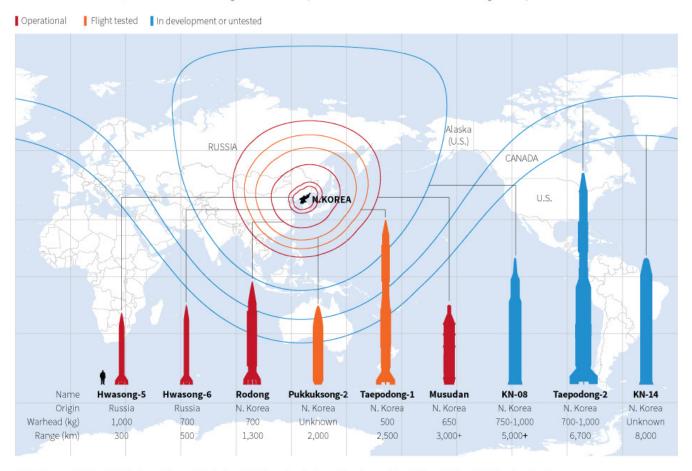
**STEVEN PIFER:** My question about their missile capabilities is that, the Musudan, which is assessed to have a 2,500-4,000 kilometer range (1,550-2,485 mile), has been declared operational since 2008. But they only tested it last year, and its success rate was one out of six, right?

**EVANS REVERE:** I don't think it was even one out of eight.

**STEVEN PIFER:** Yes, so it tends to blow up a lot. And it's fair to say the ICBM part of the challenge is even more difficult. At some point the North Koreans can get the capability, but we may have more time than the conventional wisdom suggests.

### North Korean missile range

Nuclear testing is part of a process that moves Pyongyang closer to miniaturising nuclear warheads to mount on intercontinental ballistic missiles. North Korea has well over 1,000 missiles of various ranges. Below is a comparison of North Korea's ballistic missiles' range and capabilities.



Notes: Ranges of KN-08 and KN-14 show minimum estimates from CSIS; Taepodong-2 shows designed range but could travel further with lightened payload.

Sources: The Republic of Korea Ministry of National Defense; National Intelligence Service, South Korea; Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); Reuters

**JOHN ALLEN:** I think a useful way of thinking about the threat is, first, the threat of a peninsular conflict; second, the threat of a regional conflict; and then the threat of intercontinental conflict, in the context of the North Koreans taking an intercontinental shot at U.S. territories, Hawaii, or the U.S. mainland.

I think one of the things that we often neglect is the need to very quickly pull into the conversation our Northeast Asian allies—because often the conversation goes straight to the U.S.-North Korea issue to the exclusion of the peninsular battle that will occur. That war plan involves hundreds of thousands of troops. Virtually all of our standing forces flow to the region. Just about everything we have. It's a huge battle. We expect hundreds of thousands of troops to be fighting along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) within a relatively short period, just days. There are thousands of artillery pieces able to strike Seoul as we speak. All they have to do is pull the lanyard. They don't have to drive out of garrison in order deploy to their firing positions. They're there now. So there is an immediacy to the peninsular conflict that ought to be first and foremost in our thinking about what the threat—and what the potential fight—on the Korean Peninsula really looks like.

You can contemplate taking preemptive action based on the assembly of an ICBM, a good engine test, a launch vehicle, and strong intelligence about the miniaturization of the warhead that can be put on the nose cone. But the question immediately becomes what happens next because the spasm of violence that will come immediately afterward, we have to—we must—anticipate that.

REUTERS

It could well result in the decimation of the capital of our treaty ally, with untold thousands of casualties among the Korean population, plus a massive launch of ballistic missiles at Japan as well, not just to attack the Japanese but also to try to knock U.S. forces in Japan out of the conflict as well. Whether any of those missiles have nuclear weapons on them or not, we don't know, but we do know it's a peninsular battle, and then it's almost immediately a regional battle.



**BRUCE JONES:** I recall a sobering assessment done several years ago by former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair describing what such a "spasm" of violence would look like in terms of civilian casualties in Seoul.

**JOHN ALLEN:** It's huge numbers. It would be in the hundreds of thousands within days, and then imagine the refugee columns. And the refugee columns flowing south would make it very difficult for allied conventional forces to begin to move to battle positions, and to fight or defend against the North. Having exercised a lot along the DMZ and experienced firsthand some of the very close terrain along the DMZ, I can't emphasize enough that you can't separate preemptive action from the massive battle that follows. And it's very reckless to think that's possible, especially with this regime in Pyongang. If we take action to preempt that ballistic missile attack, anticipate a fight on the Peninsula involving hundreds of thousands of troops right away—plus Japan being systematically attacked because many of our forces that would participate in the peninsular battle would originate out of Japan. And it's worth remembering that, when we think about what's in the nose cones, the warheads could be high-yield explosives, they could be nuclear, but they also could be chemical. And if we don't like what we've seen in Syria, remember the North Koreans have the capacity to really terrorize the Koreans and the Japanese with these missiles.

**EVANS REVERE:** That includes the capability to target the full range of U.S. bases in both countries, Japanese port facilities, and major population centers.

JOHN ALLEN: Yes, and driving U.S. forces to have to operate in a chemical environment—defending against it and fighting in it—really impacts our operational capability. So it's extraordinarily important for decisionmaking authorities to understand the velocity, the enormity, and the scope of the decisionmaking required in this conflict. It's going to break very quickly, and forces unleashed by these decisions will be enormous. This argues strongly for senior U.S., Korean, and Japanese leadership to gather periodically to be exposed to the speed of the decisions they'll have to make in order to be successful in the execution of the war in the region, and if we are intercepting long-range ballistic missiles headed for Guam or Hawaii, or even the continental United States, then there are other aspects of the response as well.

ROBERT EINHORN: There are a couple things I would add. First, the North Koreans have deployed systems before testing them. They have no idea whether they are going to work, but they want the capability in place so that, in a crisis, they can say they have the capability, it's deployed, and it's ready to go. I would be surprised if they didn't have someplace in their country a prototype ICBM system of some sort that might be aimed at Montana but—assuming it worked—might hit Wyoming. Second, I think they are pursuing a clear strategy in terms of their missile capabilities. It's to try to prevent our plan to reinforce the Peninsula in a crisis. They put a lot of effort into the Musudan, which is designed to hit Guam and also, as John pointed out, they have the capability to hit ports and air bases in Japan and South Korea, to prevent the massive flow of U.S. reinforcements to the Peninsula. And then there is the ICBM against the homeland, which is intended to be the ultimate deterrent to our intervention in a peninsular crisis. So they have a strategy.

BRUCE JONES: Now that we have the "what," let's turn to the "why." What is the purpose, as they see it, of having these programs?

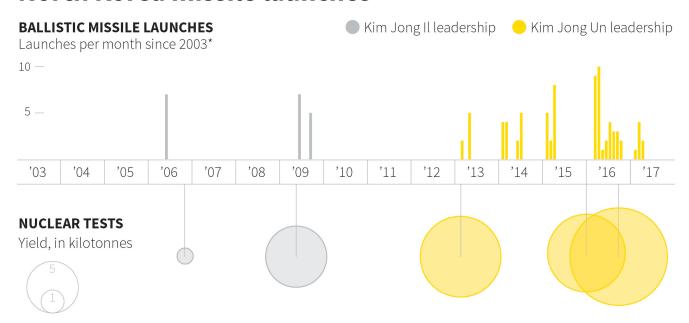
ROBERT EINHORN: Look, everyone assumes—and I believe correctly—that the principal reason they maintain these programs is to ensure the survival of their regime. They believe the nuclear and missile programs can deter U.S. intervention on the Peninsula. Pyongyang also sees these programs as consolidating internal support for the regime; the North Korean military likes these programs. But the key question is whether the motivation for their program is essentially defensive—to discourage the United States from attacking them or trying to undermine their regime—or whether they have offensive purposes in mind—to deter U.S. intervention in peninsular affairs so they will have a freer hand to pursue an aggressive agenda in line with their official doctrine to reunify the Peninsula, with military force if necessary.

You'll recall that, in 2010, they sank the Cheonan (the South Korean Navy ship). They shelled an island that had civilians and military personnel on it. Do they become more ambitious as they develop more capability? Do they think they can get away with more? I don't think we know the answer to that question.

JONATHAN POLLACK: I think they have multiple levels of motivation, and we also have to factor in whether Kim Jong Un is different from those who preceded him. I really believe that, if North Korea does have a strategy, it's a "don't f- with us" strategy. But that doesn't spell out in a lot of detail exactly what they think they need.

On the basis of their official statements, they say that, as long as the United States remains a hostile power, they will continue to build up quantitatively and qualitatively. Taken literally, that means it's open-ended. But for all of the North's boasting, they don't exactly have unbounded resources. Like all political systems, you have to make choices. They have sunk enormous amounts of money into these programs. The big surprise of 2016 was the rate at which they were testing, so there does appear to be a felt urgency to get to wherever that promised land may be—whether symbolic equivalence to the United States or having capabilities that very few other states have achieved. But if the logic is you just keep on building these things, cranking them out like sausage, then it begins to look like Soviet planning—and they don't have those resources.

# North Korea missile launches



<sup>\*</sup>Data compiled by Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) since 2003. Shows ballistic missiles only and does not include surface-to-air, surface-to-ship missiles or rockets. Data as of April 15, 2017.

Sources: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); Reuters

W. Cai, 15/04/2017 REUTERS

**EVANS REVERE:** I agree with Robert that regime survival is the essential driver of this program. It has always been, and always will be. They understand what happened to Iraq and Libya. They understand that, in the minds of the Americans, nukes get your attention. So the goal is to acquire nukes, build them as quickly as you can, demonstrate certain capabilities, demonstrate a preparedness to use them, and that will essentially guarantee the continued survival of this otherwise shaky place, North Korea. That is, on its face, a defensive motivation.

But as Bob suggests, there's also an implicitly offensive aspect to this motivation that one hears in conversations with the North Koreans. If you really push them, you start to hear about the need for the international community to accept them as a *de facto* nuclear weapon state, about the need for a peace treaty with us, and here, you start to get at another aspect of their motivation: a game plan to change the balance of power on the Peninsula, and thereby to achieve the unification of the Korean Peninsula. They believe that possession of nuclear weapons changes the fundamental situation on the Peninsula to such a degree that they can see a glimmer of hope of achieving a peace treaty that ends or substantially weakens the U.S.-ROK alliance. They also seek to affect things with Japan by reminding the Japanese that they are going to be targets in the event of a new Korean war. So they ultimately see these weapons as being key to a game plan that reunifies the Korean Peninsula on their terms.

**JONATHAN POLLACK:** I agree with everything Evans has said. And this is not exactly a state secret. This has been, from the first time that North Korea acknowledged they have nuclear weapons, embedded in their official language.

**RICHARD BUSH:** I also agree with Evans but would only add that, whatever Pyongyang's long-term objective, in the medium term, acquiring a full nuclear capability allows them to be reckless at the conventional level and exploit the stability-instability paradox, seeking to exploit points of weakness in the U.S.-ROK alliance and influence ROK domestic politics.

**BRUCE JONES:** In the past there has been the question of whether Pyongyang was developing a nuclear capability that it would possibly be willing to trade away for other things, or would never relinquish the capability. What is your assessment?

**JONATHAN POLLACK:** It's a fair distinction, and, unambiguously, I would take number two—that this is not something to be negotiated away. There's no reason to believe that's part of Kim Jong Un's thinking. That's the choice that Kim Jong Un has made, much more so than his father, Kim Jong II.

RICHARD BUSH: Was there any point in history where it was willing to trade away the nuclear program?

**JONATHAN POLLACK:** We certainly believed so! I believe that, at a few moments in time, Kim II Sung might have been willing to enter into that negotiation. He was a man who, in his later years, knew their economy was going down the drain. He anticipated North Korea's famine. There might have been a limited window, but one of the things we know about the Kim family going back to Kim II Sung is that they might make an initial agreement with the U.S., and then they would come back demanding more.

**ROBERT EINHORN:** Robert Gallucci (chief U.S. negotiator with Pyongyang on the 1994 Agreed Framework) used to say that the North Koreans have never been prepared to sell their nuclear capability, but they've been prepared to rent it.

**EVANS REVERE:** There is a 1998 answer and a 2017 answer to the question of Pyongyang's willingness to negotiate away its nuclear program. Back in 1998, and even through the early 2000s, we continued to test a hypothesis: Is there a price we can pay or some things we can put on the table that are so appealing that they would convince the North Koreans to go down a different path and give up the nuclear program? We tested that hypothesis through several administrations. The bottom line is the answer is "no." You never want to say never in diplomacy, but I'm quite sure now there is almost nothing that would convince Pyongyang to give up its nuclear capability; this is a regime that is determined to retain a robust level of nuclear capability for all of the reasons we've been discussing here.

#### 2. ESCALATORY SCENARIOS

**BRUCE JONES:** We have been discussing strategic drivers. But there are also contingencies. They can make mistakes. We can make mistakes. Things can escalate unintentionally. What do you see as the most concerning contingencies? Where are we most vulnerable to mistakes and inadvertent escalation?

**EVANS REVERE:** A number of us have actually had this conversation with the North Koreans. We have said to the North Koreans: "Do you understand, does your leadership understand, the implications of your using words like 'first strike' and 'preemptive strike' against the United States or U.S. allies? Have you thought through the implications, particularly in terms of what it requires American defense planners to do in response?" I came away from those discussions really disturbed. I don't think their leadership gets it, and so we may be putting ourselves on a path in which one side or the other could very easily miscalculate the other's intentions.

**JONATHAN POLLACK:** There is far too much comment about preemption, much of it coming from the media: "We're going to go bomb the hell out of the nuclear test site." I scratch my head on that. Everything that John [Allen] said would then be triggered. It would not be war by design. The North Koreans talk about preemption, too. And I don't know that anybody in Pyongyang is going to challenge Kim on this.

**BRUCE JONES:** Yes, you hear the word "preemption," which implies some sort of pin-prick or one-off strike like the 59 Tomahawks in Syria. But you're talking about a vastly different magnitude of operations.

**JOHN ALLEN:** We should be worried about provoking the very miscalculation or the very provocations that would, in turn, create for us a sequence of events over which we may lose control, especially when you have escalating rhetoric on both sides. Because we really don't know what the trigger points are with the North

Koreans—when exactly they will perceive they have to posture themselves in a way that pulls the trigger.

When I was teaching at Yale last week, a young Korean student came up to me afterwards with tears in her eyes, asking if we were getting ready to preempt-because her family is in Seoul. South Koreans all know what will happen to Seoul if this happen.

I told her that I believe a U.S. act of preemption would occur on that day we become relatively certain that an ICBM with a nuclear weapon in the warhead is poised to be launched; that's about the trigger for us to preempt. There will be lots of indicators before that. Shy of that, I said, the United States probably is not going to take preemptive action to attempt to prevent a North Korean launch. That's a useful formulation, I think, because it might get people to breathe more calmly. But North Korea is the one country on the planet that we can get in a fight with by virtue of our rhetoric. As I said, hundreds of thousands of troops will be fighting on the DMZ within days if we lose control of this thing.

JONATHAN POLLACK: We also need to be careful when we talk about ICBM capability as the "game changer" because we risk missing the harm that North Korea can do right now with or without nuclear weapons. We don't want to signal to our allies that it's only when Pyongyang can hit the U.S. that this really matters. One of our great successes, which took a lot of effort, is that we have two very potent allies in Northeast Asia, neither one of whom has a nuclear weapons program.

EVANS REVERE: This is a really important point. The subtext to a new and intense U.S. concern about the North's ICBM capability and threat is, "now that the dagger is pointed at us, we're starting to focus." That message is damaging to our alliances with Seoul and Tokyo.

**JOHN ALLEN:** And counterintuitively, now that the dagger is pointed at us, we're ready to go to war on Northeast Asian soil. Planning under all other scenarios, we appeared to be willing to contain or negotiate.

RICHARD BUSH: One thing that worries me a lot is the failure to distinguish between having the capability and having the intention to use it. Those are two very different things.

ROBERT EINHORN: I'm breathing calmly about this. Despite the tension, the headlines, and the media, I don't think we are on the verge of an armed confrontation. I really don't. But I'm concerned about one particular scenario. I don't think we're going to preempt any North Korean activity by striking at North Korean territory, but if we were to try to intercept a missile test, I don't know how the North would react to that. Obviously, they would see it as a hostile act, but whether they would feel a need to do a provocation, to me, that's the most likely thing to trigger a miscalculation.

JOHN ALLEN: I agree. We're probably going to see a U.S. undertaking to look at an interception of a North Korean missile. That's going to be a very important demonstration of capability. But if this rhetoric continues, we will see some conventional provocative act, including artillery by the North Koreans, just to register that there is a full range of capabilities that they can bring to bear, not just ballistic missiles. Whether it's a decimation of a village or something else, I am concerned we're going to see some conventional provocation.

**EVANS REVERE:** That's pretty frightening, because the North Koreans know there's a retaliation plan—a bilateral plan to hit them back.

RICHARD BUSH: Evans is referring to the aftermath of the Cheonan incident in 2010. At that point, the South Koreans moved from deterrence by denial to deterrence by threat of retaliation. We worked with them very closely on this plan. We have believed up to this point that this has deterred the North Koreans from doing anything like that again, and we've seen six and a half years without anything like that. But I hope we're not leaning toward a situation where that plan is tested. But longer term, once they have the capability to hit the United States with a nuclear weapon, the North Koreans may go back to that sort of thing, to see how solid the U.S.-ROK alliance is.

JOHN ALLEN: My sense is that if they believe our rhetoric is leading to some kind of an attack, we'll see something like that relatively soon.

**EVANS REVERE:** I don't know if they would do that. The plan is there. It's been communicated. They understand what we are prepared to do in response to another conventional attack.

JONATHAN POLLACK: It's worth recalling an episode in 2015 that might have been President Park Geun-hye's finest moment in office. Following North Korean threats of military retaliation for South Korean propaganda broadcasts along the DMZ, Park made clear to two very senior North Korean generals that South Korea would in turn retaliate for any such attack by Pyongyang. For whatever reason, when push came to shove, Park was able to face them down. I think it was in many ways a moment where the South Koreans played their cards very, very well. They didn't shoot, but they warned the North they would. But that episode is also one of the things about North Korea that makes it so vexing. Every so often, there are signs of rationality coming out of the kingdom. Sometimes when you see these episodes, you wonder if maybe we're just not in on the joke.

EVANS REVERE: It's also worth considering what message—with respect to preemption—we send with our deployments to the region. One carrier battle group does not a preemptive strike make, but three or four is different. On the other hand, you're not seeing the flow of forces and assets that we would need to fight this battle. The evacuation of American civilians from Seoul is not happening. There is no mobilization of ROK military reserves.

#### 3. REGIONAL ACTORS

BRUCE JONES: This takes us to another important dimension: It's one thing to think through Pyongyang's strategy and ours, but with respect to both military options and negotiations, we also of course have to factor in ROK thinking, Japanese thinking, and Chinese thinking. Do we have a good understanding of ROK, Japanese, and Chinese thinking on these issues, or are there significant holes in our understanding?

EVANS REVERE: Both of our Northeast Asian allies are shaken up by this. They are concerned about the potential for U.S. steps that might be undertaken without adequate consultation. All of this will be a centerpiece of Vice President Pence's conversations with the Koreans, and in Tokyo this week.

The x-factor with respect to Seoul is the upcoming presidential election, in the aftermath of which the United States may take a turn toward a harder-edged approach while the new ROK government might be naturally predisposed to turn in the other direction. We may see echoes of an earlier, problematic era in U.S.-ROK relations, when Washington and Seoul found themselves at odds over North Korea policy. That being said, the North Korea that the next South Korean government will face is very different from the North Korea of a decade ago. There is also strong popular support in South Korea for a firm posture—not necessarily an aggressive posture toward North Korea-but a firm posture. So the question is whether (ROK presidential frontrunner) Moon Jae-in will respond to that or tilt toward a more idealistic view that, if only we sit down and talk with the North Koreans, everything will be fine. There is also a potential issue here in terms of trilateral alliance coordination with Japan.

JONATHAN POLLACK: It's interesting to watch the comments of the presidential candidates. Moon Jae-in has said some tough-minded things. But his natural disposition leads him back in time to a softer approach, even if you are dealing with a much more militarily capable regime in the North. We could face a situation where, at the same time that we're ratcheting up all kinds of things, we get the defection of an ally. That may be overstating this somewhat, but it is something that has to be factored into the equation.

**EVANS REVERE:** And the North Koreans are watching really carefully.

JONATHAN POLLACK: Absolutely.

**ROBERT EINHORN:** There are differences between progressives and conservatives. Do you reopen the Kaesong industrial complex? Do you negotiate with the North, and so forth. But on one issue, there is absolute agreement across the South Korean political spectrum, and that is whether the U.S. needs to consult with our

ROK allies before we engage in military actions. From the most conservative South Koreans to Moon Jae-in to Ahn Cheol-soo, the other left-of-center candidate, all say the United States needs to consult before using military force.

**EVANS REVERE:** Yes. At the first debate among the candidates the other day, that was something that came up in a big way, and right across the board they were all agreeing on no preemption and the need for full consultation.

JOHN ALLEN: This is really important for U.S. leadership to understand. The president of the United States will look far more responsible if he is having, and his people are having, constructive conversations with our treaty allies, our go-to-war allies, than if he is acting in isolation from that conversation and only talking directly with Kim Jong Un. He will get more credit on the global stage for that consultation and coordination, and frankly can probably solve the problem and stabilize the region a lot more effectively.

JONATHAN POLLACK: It's heartening that we have had a very senior U.S. official visiting South Korea basically once a month since the president took office.

**BRUCE JONES:** How does China fit into this equation?

JONATHAN POLLACK: China. I've been picking up some very, very different things coming out of reasonably authoritative Chinese media over the course of the past several months. A narrative sounding more and more like, these guys-the North Koreans-are going to drive things right into a ditch. Beijing seems to be trying to create more distance from North Korea. The Chinese for a long time have said that if Pyongyang does something really stupid, they are on their own; we are not pulling their chestnuts out of the fire. The puzzle we see is that President Xi Jinping has at different junctures said things that we have never heard a Chinese leader say before. He did this when he met with Obama in California in 2013, and now he's done it again with Trump in Florida. At the same time, Xi continues, in terms of operational Chinese policy, to very much walk on eggshells with North Korea. I know what all the standard arguments are. But I think he has much more immediate concerns. He knows that if the situation deteriorates, they have their 800-mile border with the North, and he can envision a million and one things that are very, very bad for Beijing.

Chinese colleagues are saying that the debate has advanced a lot in China. Now, we've heard this before; the Chinese get angry, they're frustrated, things appear in their media, and then they fall back. But the stakes have gone up hugely now, and they seem to know it. The question is whether Xi is going to be the pitiful, helpless giant, or if he really means business.

China's decision to turn back coal shipments from North Korea is very interesting. Apparently, they did this despite not being up to the quota allowed by latest U.N. Security Council resolution. The Chinese also have now cancelled tour groups going to North Korea. They have cancelled Air China flights into North Korea. China's special representative for Korean Peninsula affairs, Wu Dawei, who knows the North Koreans better than anyone in Beijing, just came back from five days in South Korea-the highest-level Chinese official to go to South Korea since the whole flap about THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile defense system). But the North Koreans won't let him in. He can't get an invitation to go North.

Here's the point: A lot of people in the United States, official and unofficial, make an assumption that when we talk about putting pressure on North Korea, it is really about putting pressure on China. There's a widespread view that the Chinese could just bring down this regime, just cut them off, head them off. We are convinced that the road to get to Pyongyang goes through Beijing. My view right now is that there might not be any road to Pyongyang.

ROBERT EINHORN: China's approach to pressuring North Korea is not an on-off switch. It's a rheostat. You can make it go slightly up, slightly down. I think that's what the Chinese approach is to North Korea. You turn it up, and then you turn it down. That's what they've been doing for years and years. The Chinese are not sure what level of pressure will ultimately create a sequence of events leading them to completely lose control, that could result in war or result in the collapse of the regime.

EVANS REVERE: And that remains mainstream Chinese thinking. The points that Jonathan has made are all valid, but then you also have these fascinating export/import figures released by the Chinese that suggest a pretty impressive spike in North Korea-China trade, literally in the middle of this crisis, as things are unfolding. That's data point one.

Data point two is, if you talk to those who follow these sanctions, there is very clear evidence of ongoing Chinese cooperation with the North Koreans in some very sensitive areas that is contributing, at least indirectly, and maybe even directly, to North Korean missile and nuclear capabilities.

The Chinese authorities are looking the other way as the North Korean companies operate in Manchuria, and Chinese banks are continuing to cooperate in financing certain purchases, providing assistance, and getting German or Singaporean technology, or whatever, into the hands of the North Koreans. So all of this is happening simultaneously.

BRUCE JONES: Is the inconsistency a lack of policy coherence, or something more nefarious?

JONATHAN POLLACK: It's a good question. A lot of the economic activity involves smaller banks, ethnic Korean minorities in China, but the point is that this is where we should really be holding China's feet to the fire.

**EVANS REVERE:** It raises the question of whether to apply secondary sanctions on the Chinese entities.

JONATHAN POLLACK: We've learned a lot more about these activities over recent years, and so we have a story we can tell the Chinese-not to shame them publicly, but in closed-door discussion.

#### 4. U.S. OBJECTIVES AND OPTIONS

BRUCE JONES: Let's now turn to the options in front of the country, and in front of the president. We've talked about capability, motivations, negotiations, sanctions, and military options. What would be your recommended course of action?

There are really two questions here: One, what are we trying to accomplish? Are we trying to freeze the weapons program? Are we trying to roll it back? Are we trying to eradicate it? What are we trying to accomplish? And two, what strategy are we employing? What combination of diplomacy, pressure, force, et cetera?

JONATHAN POLLACK: In essence—I hate to use the term, but I will—it's a containment strategy. It's accepting the reality that these weapons exist. You don't have to give them any kind of public acknowledgment or political credit, but it represents a profound new danger to the international system as a whole. And for now, what it really requires is a degree of regional collaboration to contain the threat by a variety of means.

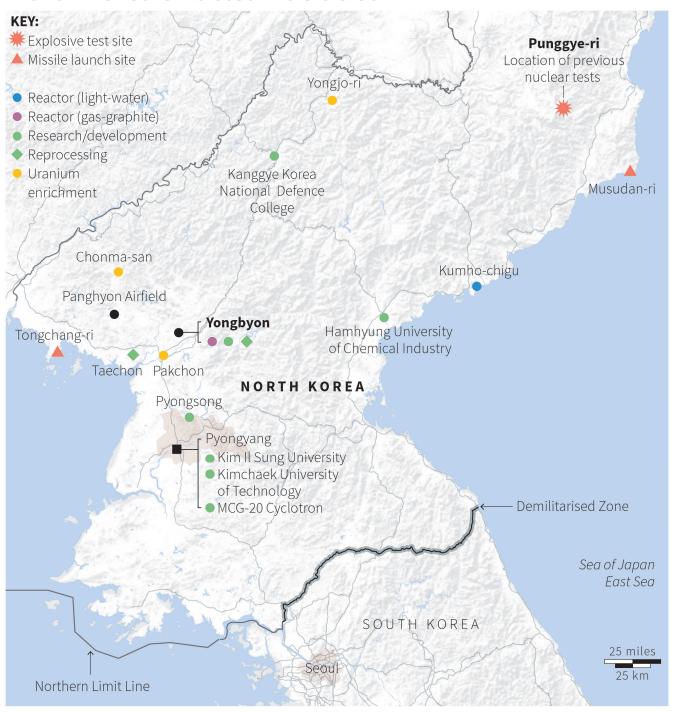
ROBERT EINHORN: I think that there really are just two basic approaches. The military option I don't think is on the table unless there's an imminent threat of ICBM use against the homeland. So the two principal approaches: One is a pressure-only approach, and two is a pressure-plus-negotiation approach. Both approaches have certain things in common, including ratcheting up the pressure, the sanctions, getting the Chinese to play a role, and deterrence.

I think the pressure-alone strategy becomes a containment strategy. The idea behind pressure alone is essentially to get the North Koreans to cry "uncle." I don't think they are going to do that. So pressure-only evolves into a containment strategy, a long-term containment strategy which involves trying to decrease their sources of hard currency, limit their procurement of sensitive technology. All of that, and hoping, over the long term, for the collapse of this despicable regime.

But if there is willingness of the United States to engage and negotiate, you have to decide on the goal of negotiations. What are you trying to achieve? And I think there are three possible goals.

One is less-for-less, which is getting them not to test nuclear weapons, not to test long-range missiles, perhaps including space-launched vehicles. And you can verify those things. The basic idea is to cap the confidence they could have in their nuclear and missile technology. Less activity for less pressure. You could tell them we are not going to impose more sanctions.

# North Korea's nuclear facilities



Sources: Nuclear Threat Initiative; Federation of American Scientists; U.S.-Korea Institute, Johns Hopkins University; USGS.

Staff, 12/09/2016 REUTERS

Second is a freeze. I would do a very demanding freeze, which is no testing of nukes or long-range missiles or space launch vehicles, and no enrichment or reprocessing anywhere in North Korea. That means not only standing down at the known facilities—at the Yongbyon complex—but also North Korea declaring any covert nuclear facilities outside of the known complex. They have to admit the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect. And I would go beyond that. I would borrow from the Iran deal some innovative arrangements so that, if the IAEA seeks an inspection that is blocked by North Korea, it can go to a joint commission and Pyongyang could be outvoted by the others on the joint commission. And then Pyongyang has to go along with the inspection or get sent to the Security Council where sanctions can be re-imposed, and so forth. That's where Russia and China have to be helpful. So that's the freeze.

The third option is near-term denuclearization. Complete and verifiable denuclearization of the North. I don't think that's achievable. I don't think, as an initial step, they are going to agree to get rid of their deterrent. So that's why I would support the second approach: a comprehensive, demanding, verifiable freeze—and this is important—with some commitment by the North Koreans to continue to pursue an agreement to achieve complete and verifiable denuclearization. If you had just a freeze without that longer-term commitment to go all the way, I don't think the South Koreans and the Japanese would stand for that.

But the North Koreans will demand compensation. And I suspect there's not much compensation that the American taxpayer is prepared to stomach. So that becomes hard and politically very difficult.

**EVANS REVERE:** Picking up on Bob's third point about what the North Koreans would not be prepared to do, I'm inclined to agree that it is unlikely—maybe even highly unlikely—that the North Koreans are going to give up the insurance policy of their nuclear weapons.

JONATHAN POLLACK: The "treasured sword of justice," as they like to call it.

**EVANS REVERE:** I think it's worth one more shot, so I agree that the approach worth pursuing is pressure-plusnegotiations. But it must be pressure the likes of which the North Koreans have never experienced before: things should happen in the covert realm, the sanctions realm, the secondary sanctions realm, human rights prosecutions, encouraging officials to defect, more robust military exercises and missile defense deployments, cutting them off from not only the international banking and financial systems but also their trading partners, and minimizing their ability to earn foreign currency. It would be like the 2005 Banco Delta Asia effort on steroids. In other words, the pressure that would hopefully lead into negotiations would need to put at risk the very stability of the regime, at least in the minds of the North Korean leadership, to convince them that the thing that they think is going to preserve their regime (nuclear weapons) has the potential to lead to the end of their regime. And of course the offer of negotiations provides an off-ramp.

This requires us to take some risks, but it pushes the North Korean regime to the edge. It doesn't push them over the edge, but it makes them look down into the abyss and see the potential end of their regime. Ideally, this approach sees the Chinese cooperating with us. And it ends one of two ways. The goal is to try another shot at denuclearization, using this approach. If it works, everybody wins, and we can put in place mechanisms that get us to where we need to go, and we have a lot of experience in this regard. If it doesn't work, we have then teed up the basis for regime change or regime destabilization, which may eventually be our only recourse.

**BRUCE JONES:** And because regime change is a term that gets bandied around, and it means different things, you are not talking, in the first instance, about a U.S. military action to overthrow the regime?

**EVANS REVERE:** No—unless, of course, we need to act to defend against an imminent threat to us or our allies. I am contemplating non-kinetic action, such as sanctions and other tools, so that the regime unravels from within. So the regime becomes too unable to sustain itself, and the only place it can look for sustenance is Beijing—but hopefully you've been able to get Beijing to buy in so that the North Koreans realize that the insurance policy they've been counting on is not going to deliver for them.

One of the important conversations that you need to have with the Chinese, as you are talking through this strategy, is what happens if North Korea goes down. What happens if we push them over the edge? What does

it look like, what does the future of the Korean Peninsula look like? At the end of the day, we need some level of Chinese buy-in and the end state needs to accord with U.S., Chinese, and South Korean security interests.

BRUCE JONES: Am I wrong in thinking that if it gets to a point where the regime starts to feel like it's at risk of coming apart from within, it then has two choices? It can denuclearize, or it can push the button?

EVANS REVERE: Let's go back to where we started in this conversation. Why do they have these weapons? What is the goal? It is to survive. It is not to die. It is not to cause a nuclear holocaust that causes their country to disappear. At the end of the day, I think they are rational.

JOHN ALLEN: It's deterrence for survival. But if their survival is in jeopardy from pressure short of military action, then they have to make a hard decision.

JONATHAN POLLACK: But you have to allow for the possibility that if they really feel that the walls of the kingdom are coming down, the goal could still be to keep the outside world out. By that I mean us, the Chinese, the South Koreans, maybe even the Russians. What if Kim Jong Un, for demonstration purposes, pops a couple of nuclear weapons on either coasts to in effect say, there's more where this came from and if you come into North Korea you are going to be in a nuclear environment. You are going to be fighting in a nuclear environment.

**EVANS REVERE:** The policy I am advocating is pressure-plus-negotiations to get to a freeze and denuclearization; and in our hip pocket is the possibility of regime change. The administration needs to not forget to be bad cop and good cop. The good cop shows them what we are prepared to offer; it shows them the path, and shows them what the future can look like.

BRUCE JONES: But they—and the Chinese—have to have the confidence that we mean that.

**EVANS REVERE:** For me, a valid interim goal would be the kind of freeze that we've just talked about, because that has credibility. But that is an interim goal, not the end state.

**RICHARD BUSH:** You never stop saying denuclearization is the ultimate goal.

**EVANS REVERE:** That's right, that's right.

**RICHARD BUSH:** We should never give up the option of negotiating with the North. For relations with China, and for broad policy considerations, that has to be part of the package. And I distinguish between discussions and negotiations. Discussions are the way you find out whether negotiations are possible. My pessimistic view of this is that what we can achieve is not what we would like to achieve because of North Korean goals, which are conflicting with our goals. If we could get to the second option-a freeze with strict conditions-that would be great. But we have to prepare for that not being achievable, despite all of this effort. So, in that messy situation, what are our goals?

Number one is to avoid war, number two is to preserve the U.S.-ROK alliance, number three is to maintain as much U.S.-China cooperation as possible on this challenge. In this regard, I think the North Koreans are actually our best ally in that they can be counted on to continue doing silly stuff that will help us make the case that North Korea is as much a threat to Chinese security as it is to South Korean security, and our security. So that implies we should not exaggerate the danger of another missile test, or another nuclear test. There's one set of circumstances where we will have to act—the imminent launch of an ICBM tipped with a nuclear warhead—but let's not treat all of these scenarios the same. So we can hope that something like our second option becomes possible, but we need to be preparing for, and starting to act on a policy of containment.

BRUCE JONES: So, to review the bidding, nobody at this table believes that, absent an imminent ICBM launch, a preemptive strike is a wise strategy. But in either of the the pressure-alone or pressure-plus-negotiations strategies, is the threat of military action part of the strategy, or is it unwise?

**EVANS REVERE:** I think it has to be there, ever present in the background.

**ROBERT EINHORN:** On the table, to coin a phrase.

**RICHARD BUSH:** But you don't have to convince the North Koreans.

BRUCE JONES: But am I right in thinking that the favored strategy of amping up pressure, even with an offer of negotiations, has a higher risk of unanticipated consequences than others?

**EVANS REVERE:** It requires a certain level of faith in North Korean rationality.

**BRUCE JONES:** And Chinese rationality and American rationality.

**RICHARD BUSH:** And, on our part, a high level of skill in design and implementation.

EVANS REVERE: This is a really important point. What we are discussing would require a very elaborate calibration across agencies. It would be all hands on deck. You need to work with allies. You need to work with banks. You need to work with financial sector actors. You need to work with the World Trade Organization. This really requires a lot of skill.

JOHN ALLEN: That's an important point. We'll need a very strong and staffed-up policymaking infrastructure to provide the sophistication that this strategy requires. We otherwise self-limit ourselves.

BRUCE JONES: So is this purely about scale of pressure, or is it really about having in the backdrop the regime change option?

ROBERT EINHORN: I don't think these are incompatible, frankly. This is about sequencing. I would start off very tough. In fact, I'd start it much the way the Trump administration has started out. I'd tone down some of the rhetoric, but you have to send a signal to the Chinese that we really mean business—underscore that we consider this a mortal threat. Threaten Chinese entities with secondary sanctions, and really put the pressure on, while at the same time telling the Chinese we're prepared to negotiate. If and when the Chinese can deliver the North Koreans to the table with some sense that they're prepared to negotiate seriously, you go and start out with the objective of denuclearization.

Go back to the 2005 joint statement when Pyongyang committed to denuclearization. If that doesn't work, then you can degrade gracefully to the point where you're pursuing a very demanding freeze. What I wouldn't allow is for the negotiations to degrade to a situation where you have a freeze only at the known complex, so you really have no idea what they're doing elsewhere in the country. That would be unsustainable. If that doesn't work, you can decide whether you want to pursue less-for-less. Or you can credibly tell China, "we tried your approach, it hasn't worked." Then settle in for long-term containment with intense pressure and the "soft" regime change elements.

**EVANS REVERE:** The other thing that the intense-pressure-plus-exit-ramp approach gets you is the potential for Chinese buy-in. It also sends an important message to the international community that we're not out to overthrow the North Korean regime. We're out to push them back to the negotiating table. And I think you get strong international support that way. You also get, I think, the support of the next ROK government, which is not going to be averse to a policy that has folded into it dialogue and negotiations.

ROBERT EINHORN: You need China and the ROK. You cannot have a North Korea policy that is opposed by China and the ROK. You have to have them on board, and the only way you get them on board is to say, yes, we're prepared to negotiate.

BRUCE JONES: Are these bilateral or multi-party negotiations with North Korea?

JOHN ALLEN: I think there is a sense that, by negotiating bilaterally with them, first of all, we exclude all the partners that have to live with the outcome, number one. And number two, it elevates them to a level of credibility, prestige, and appearance that we would never want to ascribe to them.

ROBERT EINHORN: You can use the Iran model, which is to say you have a multilateral framework and, on some occasions, you have everyone at the table. Other occasions, we are talking bilaterally. It's variable geometry. At the end of the day, though, it's legitimized by the multi-party participation.

STEVEN PIFER: And the second it fails, which it may well, it's not a U.S. failure; it's a multilateral failure.

**JONATHAN POLLACK:** The level of effort that would be required to do this takes us so far beyond what we have ever managed to do before. But if we're arguing nothing is more urgent, then, ironically, the biggest uncertainty might not be what North Korea does but whether we can pull this off.

BRUCE JONES: What would be the downside, if any, of returning to the six-party format?

RICHARD BUSH: The way this has worked in the past is that we have a bilateral negotiation with the North Koreans, and then it's transferred to the Six-Party Talks—and, in a way, ratified there. That gives our allies a sense of their part in the process.

**EVANS REVERE:** And we can just remind ourselves that we already have a denuclearization agreement with North Korea. We already have the September 2005 agreement that incorporates all of North Korea's desiderata in it. Everything that they have put on the table as an issue of concern is in that agreement. We ought not to forget that. And that's why the six-party context—as complicated as it is or was—is a valuable basis on which to proceed because things have already been agreed in that context. It could be helpful to the administration to refer back to that and say that we've reached agreements with the North Koreans in the past, and we're prepared to update or refine those agreements.

JONATHAN POLLACK: To step back for a moment, the cynical view, of course, would be that threatening the outside world has been the entire basis of this regime's strategic identity from the day it was founded. I don't want to say therefore that they like enemies, but they need enemies. We're assuming their capacity to see that there's a sweet enough deal here, and, on the flip side, that we will put their regime at risk in a very direct way. Part of this might have to be a ticket out of town to a remote island.

The fundamental depravity of this regime cannot be discounted. This is a miserable, awful, awful place, we all know this. The people of North Korea deserve a better fate. The people of South Korea deserve a better fate.

BRUCE JONES: We have a very high-stakes objective here to avoid a nuclear situation. We have a high-stakes objective here to avoid a rapidly spiraling regional war. Are we prepared to provide the Chinese with the kinds of guarantees that they would want about what happens if there is a collapse of the North Korean regime?

JOHN ALLEN: We absolutely have to talk to the Chinese about it, but also the South Koreans have got to be in the room. I've been in many conversations with the South Koreans where they're very afraid that this process will occur in a manner over which they'll have no control, and, of course, they see East/West Germany as the perfect example. That reunification process set back the economy for 10 years or more. So I think a conversation with the Chinese has to have the South Koreans there as well.

STEVEN PIFER: Could you tell the Chinese that, in the event of soft regime change, and if there were a move toward Korean unification, at that point, we would revisit the presence of almost 30,000 American troops in Korea?

**ROBERT EINHORN:** We've been prepared to go very far in reassuring the Chinese.

**STEVEN PIFER:** If you do have regime collapse, my guess is that there are going to be Chinese, South Koreans, and Americans all trying to secure nuclear weapons, and we're all going to be going in the same direction, in the same place, at the same time.

**EVANS REVERE:** That very subject has been on the table in private, unofficial talks. I agree the ROK needs to be part of this. You can't have this conversation without the future ruling power on the Korean Peninsula in the room. We have been prepared, in my view, to provide some of the reassurances the Chinese would want, and there was a sense in these conversations, that the overall picture we were painting, unofficially and informally, was one that the Chinese felt comfortable with.

JONATHAN POLLACK: Yes, if North Korea goes away, this will clarify China's strategic environment for a long time. The principal concern the Chinese have is that we would retain forces in South Korea that could be

used in contingency planning against China. But quite frankly, quite apart from what our desires might be, our Korean allies get an enormous vote on this question. But this really will require incredibly candid discussions with the Chinese in which we agree that we want to prevent the Korean Peninsula from again being the object of confrontation and conflict between the United States and China. And there is historical precedent for this.

**JOHN ALLEN:** That's a powerful statement. That should be a basis for a lot of conversation.

**EVANS REVERE:** That statement was the opening premise of our unofficial talks.

RICHARD BUSH: I'll raise one more element that we haven't talked about at all-but has to be part of the solution sooner or later—which is building public support in the United States for what is going to be a really complicated, nuanced, and calibrated strategy.

BRUCE JONES: Agreed. And that will have to be the topic of our next roundtable. Thanks very much.

## **ABOUT THE PANELISTS**

#### **JOHN ALLEN**

John R. Allen is a retired U.S. Marine Corps four-star general and former commander of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. Prior to joining Brookings as senior fellow and co-director of the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, Allen served as special presidential envoy to the global coalition to counter ISIL, a position he held for 14 months. Immediately following retirement from the Marine Corps, Allen was the senior advisor to the secretary of defense on Middle East Security, and in that role he led the security dialogue with Israel and the Palestinian Authority for 15 months within the Middle East peace process.

As a general officer, Allen served as the principal director of Asia-Pacific policy in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, a position he held for nearly three years. In this assignment, he was involved extensively on policy initiatives involving Mongolia, China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. He was also involved in the Six Party Talks on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

#### **RICHARD BUSH**

Richard C. Bush is a senior fellow at The Brookings Institution in the Foreign Policy Program. He is also the director of Brookings's Center for East Asia Policy Studies and holder of the Chen-fu and Cecilia Yen Koo Chair in Taiwan Studies. He served for 19 years in the U.S. government—in the House of Representatives, the Intelligence Community, and as chairman and managing director of the American Institute in Taiwan. Since coming to Brookings in 2002, he has written or co-authored four books on Taiwan and its relations with China and the United States.

#### **ROBERT EINHORN**

Robert Einhorn is a senior fellow with the Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Initiative and the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence, both housed within the Foreign Policy program at Brookings. During his career at the U.S. Department of State, Einhorn served as assistant secretary for nonproliferation during the Clinton administration and as the secretary of state's special advisor for nonproliferation and arms control during the Obama administration. At Brookings, Einhorn concentrates on arms control, nonproliferation and regional security issues (including Iran, the greater Middle East, South Asia, and Northeast Asia), and U.S. nuclear weapons policies.

#### **STEVEN PIFER**

Steven Pifer is director of the Brookings Arms Control and Non-Proliferation Initiative and a senior fellow in the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings. A retired Foreign Service officer, his more than 25 years with the State Department focused on U.S. relations with the former Soviet Union and Europe, as well as arms control and security issues. He served as deputy assistant secretary of state in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs with responsibilities for Russia and Ukraine (2001-2004), ambassador to Ukraine (1998-2000), and special assistant to the president and senior director for Russia, Ukraine and Eurasia on the National Security Council (1996-1997). In addition to Ukraine, Ambassador Pifer served at the U.S. embassies in Warsaw, Moscow, and London as well as with the U.S. delegation to the negotiation on intermediate-range nuclear forces in Geneva. From 2000 to 2001, he was a visiting scholar at Stanford's Institute for International Studies.

#### JONATHAN POLLACK

Jonathan Pollack is the Interim SK Korea Foundation Chair in Korea Studies and senior fellow in the John L. Thornton China Center at Brookings. He served as director of the Thornton China Center from 2012 to 2014. Prior to joining Brookings in 2010, he was professor of Asian and Pacific Studies and chairman of the Strategic Research Department at the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island. Pollack's expertise and principal research interests include Chinese national security strategy; U.S.-China relations; U.S. strategy in Asia and the Pacific; Korean politics and foreign policy; Asian international politics; and nuclear weapons and international security.

#### **EVANS REVERE**

Evans J.R. Revere is senior director with the Albright Stonebridge Group, providing strategic advice to clients with a specific focus on Korea, China and Japan. From 2007-2010, Revere served as president and CEO of The Korea Society.

Fluent in Chinese, Korean and Japanese, Revere retired from the Foreign Service in 2007 after a distinguished career as one of the U.S. Department of State's top Asia experts. He won numerous awards during his career, which included service as the principal deputy assistant secretary and acting assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and deputy chief of mission and charge d'affaires of the U.S. Embassy in Seoul. Revere has extensive experience in negotiations with North Korea.

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