

## *North Korea – A Path Forward*

*October 10, 2017*

First, I want to thank Brookings – not just for organizing and hosting the discussion today, but for all of the remarkable work they have been doing on this issue and so many others, to ensure that the policy community remains thoughtful, informed, and agile in approaching the toughest national security and foreign policy challenges we face in today’s ever-increasingly complex world. The discussion today, pulled together by Bruce, Ryan, and Jung – with some of the most thoughtful people I know on this topic – was particularly fascinating and worthwhile, which frankly is saying something when it comes to North Korea, given that, as everyone in this room knows, we have been discussing this very vexing topic for a long time – and it is not a small challenge to say something new or even just interesting, given the amount of ink and digital space that has been spilt over the years in an effort to identify a successful path forward.

With that introduction, I should warn you that I, too, have nothing new to say on this subject – Instead, I favor a particular combination of old ideas, which I hope to convince you is the right approach. In short, I think three lines of effort need to be engaged in at the same time:

- We should continue to increase diplomatic and economic pressure on the DPRK to bring Kim Jong Un to the table and secure a freeze as the first step in a phased approach that might ultimately lead to denuclearization;
- We should continually coordinate our efforts with our allies and engage in contingency planning with China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan in the event of a collapse of the regime; and
- We should engage in activities intended to support the people of North Korea when doing so does not significantly detract from the pressure campaign; highlight the human rights abuses of the regime; and get information to the people of North Korea regarding the outside world.

This is not really a change from where we were at the end of the Obama Administration, but I would argue that there is a greater chance for this combination to succeed now than ever before because of key shifts in the landscape over the last several years. Let me start, however, by explaining why I think this is the right approach.

As I see it, Administrations on a bipartisan basis have tended to agree on many, if not all, of the key policy objectives – (1) freezing North Korea’s nuclear weapons program with the ultimate goal of rolling back the program to achieve a denuclearized Korean Peninsula; (2) preventing the additional proliferation of nuclear weapons information and material from North Korea to other actors; (3) reassuring our allies such that, among other things, they do not pursue nuclear weapons themselves; and (4) ensuring that our efforts with respect to North Korea do not weaken other key U.S. policy initiatives, including our more general efforts to counter proliferation of nuclear weapons around the world.

Thus far, in an effort to achieve these objectives, both Democratic and Republican Administrations have implemented an approach in which we aggressively pursue economic and

diplomatic pressure on the DPRK with the stated goal of bringing them to the negotiating table – all the while recognizing that we cannot create enough pressure to do this through unilateral sanctions and that the key player is China, given that approximately 90% of North Korea’s international trade is with China. Consequently, the principal mechanism for pursuing effective sanctions has been through the United Nations and in fact, since 2006 at the instigation of the United States, the Security Council has adopted eight resolutions imposing increasingly onerous sanctions on North Korea, including severe limits on weapons trade, banking, and other financial transactions. I would argue that we need to continue to pursue such pressure – both by enacting new sanctions and by doing everything we can to encourage full enforcement of existing sanctions -- and I support the Trump Administration’s efforts in this regard. Nevertheless, such pressure must be combined with other policy initiatives, if it is to have a plausible chance for success.

Before I get to the other policy initiatives, I want to discuss the reasons for supporting diplomatic and economic pressure, versus military action.

I realize that given the current pitch of concern driven in part by the ratcheting up of rhetoric, at least 15 missile tests since President Trump took office, including an intercontinental ballistic missile test, and a sixth nuclear test, people are questioning whether we can and should continue to exercise the patience necessary for applying pressure. Some suggest that rather than continue what they perceive to be a failing policy, we should take some limited, pre-emptive strike against the regime to demonstrate that we are in fact willing to take military action, perhaps against known nuclear facilities. I will not get into the question of whether I think such a strike could effectively destroy the DPRK’s ballistic missile threat capacity or its nuclear weapons facilities but instead I would point to Chairman Dunford’s statement this summer, with which I agree -- that while a military option is not unimaginable, it would surely be “horrific” and lead to “a loss of life unlike any we have experienced in our lifetimes.”

Furthermore, it would be hard to imagine how such a strike would achieve the policy objectives identified. Surely, given everything we know about Kim Jong Un, no one doubts that he would be inclined to respond with substantial force in order to deter us from further action and to prove that he cannot be pushed around; a non-response would be perceived as weak and might lead to his overthrow – and in the face of such action he would have even less incentive, if that is possible, to give up his nuclear weapons. Additionally, China would be under substantial pressure to support the North in such a situation, given their mutual defense pact with the DPRK. What message, for example, would it send to China’s partners and prospective allies if China did not respond to an attack on their ally that was not in response to an armed attack, even if Pyongyang has engaged in threatening rhetoric?

In other words, we should be clear, as the Chairman was, that there are no costless military options here that would address the threat we are facing and while military action may seem appealing because the alternative seems less than satisfying as we watch the DPRK continue to pursue an increasingly improved nuclear weapon capability while we apply pressure, we should be careful not to get caught up in the need to look and feel strong, and instead act with strength. As Sun Tzu said, “The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting.”

To be clear, I am not suggesting that military action should be off the table – no U.S. President has ever taken it off the table and I would not recommend that we do so now, but I do not believe we have come nearly close enough to exhausting other options and in fact, a number of trends may assist our efforts in applying pressure, such that we will see better results over the next several years than we have seen in the past. Moreover, although the North Koreans have reached yet another milestone in their development of deliverable nuclear weapons with the launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile, little else has materially changed. With approximately thirty thousand US soldiers on the peninsula with their families, we were before and are now still in a situation in which Pyongyang could attack the United States and its allies, causing a terrible loss of life. In my view, Kim Jong Un has little incentive to do so, though it is possible that he can be goaded into doing something.

Another common criticism to this approach comes from those who argue that pressure makes no sense because no amount of pressure will convince Kim Jong Un to give up his nuclear weapons, which he recognizes as being key to his remaining in power. In fact, I think that is likely true but, as I see it, that is not the only reason to engage in a pressure campaign.

Among other things, even if you assume that Kim Jong Un will never come to the table -- no matter how dire the circumstances -- to negotiate in good faith a full rollback of the DPRK's nuclear weapons program, he may be willing to come to the negotiating table to negotiate a freeze and perhaps over time additional measures, such as inspections, that would allow for a slow-down of the North's nuclear program, which would be worth it in the short term, as we pursue other aspects of a broader policy intended to achieve denuclearization.

In fact, the DPRK's foreign minister indicated in 2016 that they would be willing to suspend nuclear tests if the United States stopped conducting its annual military exercises with South Korea and both China and Russia have stated their support of such an approach. While I would not support a freeze-for-freeze along these lines, I do agree with the idea of attempting a phased approach to denuclearization that starts with an interim freeze on the DPRK's ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities in exchange, perhaps, for certain modifications to the military exercises that do not reduce our readiness capabilities when it comes to defending our ally, the Republic of Korea.

We should be clear-eyed, however, about how difficult this approach will be. During any such negotiation, the North will argue that we should not continue to apply pressure against them and that sanctions should be suspended, yet of course if we pull back too far there will be little incentive for the DPRK to agree to anything and instead they will try to find ways to extend the negotiations. In my view, efforts should be made to agree in advance with China on continuing to engage in robust implementation of sanctions during the course of the negotiations, if not the addition of new sanctions. Doing so will also help convince our allies that such an engagement is not foolhardy.

Another challenge to this approach will be that engaging in such a negotiation risks appearing to accept the DPRK as a nuclear-weapon state, which would undercut our non-proliferation efforts more generally and potentially incentivize bad behavior. To mitigate against this concern, we should do what we can to make clear that any initial freeze is part of a phased approach intended,

at least from our perspective, to lead to a full denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. Finally, any adjustments we make or incentives that we offer during the course of the negotiations are likely to be concerning to our allies, and so we would need to convince them of the value of this approach, and closely coordinate our discussions, to bring them along with the reassurance that they will know what we are doing at every stage.

But as I stated earlier, a pressure campaign must be combined with two other lines of effort, one of which is to continually coordinate with our allies and in particular, engage in contingency planning with China, the Republic of Korea, and Japan in the event of a collapse of the regime.

I do not think we can rely exclusively on a phased approach to achieve our principal objective, which is to roll back North Korea's nuclear program. While not impossible, it is highly unlikely that the phased approach will lead to the DPRK willingly giving up its nuclear weapons in the near term. What seems far more likely is that over the next several years, the Regime collapses, Kim Jong Un is overthrown, or an ally successfully pursues regime change. Under such circumstances, it is not clear whether anyone that attempts to replace Kim Jong Un will be more likely to engage in good faith negotiations to achieve denuclearization but particularly in the face of a significant uprising or collapse, we face a number of extraordinary risks for which we will need to be prepared and as the pressure mounts, and more information gets into North Korea from the outside as a consequence of technological developments, the more likely we are to see such upheaval. In the event there were to be a collapse, China would likely deploy a military force into North Korea to create at the very least a buffer zone in an effort to prevent millions of North Koreans from pouring into China and to avoid having a South Korean military presence on its border; the Republic of Korea would likely ask for our assistance in a move north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel for similar reasons and in an effort to accomplish reunification, the Russians would go on high alert and perhaps take advantage of certain aspects of the situation vis-à-vis the Chinese, and in between we would have perhaps the worst "loose nukes" challenge one can imagine, with potentially uncontrolled factions of the DPRK military taking possession of conventional and unconventional weapons to defend themselves against outsiders.

Consequently, a key policy initiative that must accompany the pressure campaign intended to lead to a phased approach, is intensive contingency planning that ensures we are as prepared as we can be in the event of a regime collapse. Such contingency planning must be done not only with the Republic of Korea, but also with China, and of course Japan – for everyone should have a clear expectation in the event the situation deteriorates of what each country's military will do in order to avoid miscalculations and unintended escalation. And strategically, this planning – unlike the effort at the end of World War II that created two Koreas – should be done with the specific intent of reaching an agreement among the United States, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and China regarding an ideal end state that would include a denuclearized peninsula, a unified Korea, and perhaps the removal of, or at least a substantial reduction in, U.S. troops from the peninsula. Besides being the responsible thing to do, a coordinated contingency plan that is ultimately attractive to China may have a subtle but important impact on China's willingness to engage in more significant pressure against the DPRK.

Finally, I come to the third line of effort that I believe should be advanced in parallel to the pressure campaign and contingency planning. This line of effort has three subparts and is

focused on the North Korean people. First, it would involve engaging in activities intended to help the people of North Korea when doing so does not significantly detract from a pressure campaign, such as providing certain assistance in the event of a natural disaster. Second, it would involve highlighting the human rights abuses of the regime and third, it would involve getting information to the people of North Korea regarding the outside world. All three are intended to counter to some extent the near-constant anti-U.S. propaganda that is fed to the North Korean population, which will remain a serious problem for our national security and foreign policy even after Kim Jong Un is gone, if we have done nothing to counter their perception. As we have seen in other foreign policy scenarios, we cannot overestimate the importance of how the population in a country regards the United States, if we are to hope to influence events and avoid long-term threats that can develop in unexpected ways. Secondly, the first two activities are mutually reinforcing of the pressure campaign and would help us to maintain a multilateral coalition focused on pressure against the regime, as one of the key concerns expressed by certain partners when we ask them to assist us in applying increased pressure on the regime is that the additional sanctions under discussions may hurt the people of North Korea because the elites in the regime will only transfer the loss of revenue to them, rather than suffer themselves.

Of course, as I noted at the beginning, these ideas are not “new” and in fact, generally represent an extension of the Obama Administration’s policy, which appears to have been largely adopted by the Trump Administration, with a few adjustments. In fact, this may be the policy that the Trump Administration is currently pursuing -- but if so, I would make a few suggestions that I believe would increase their chances of success:

First, I would avoid engaging in rhetorical barbs with Kim Jong Un, particularly if they are not coordinated with our allies and even China. Without a carefully coordinated approach, the allies are likely to be on edge and will feel unsure of U.S. intentions, which may cause them to take uncoordinated action and ultimately not be as useful a partner as we would hope for in solving this extremely difficult challenge. Moreover, historically, the North would like nothing better than to drive a wedge between the United States and the Republic of Korea, and we should not make their job any easier. Furthermore, such barbs, if not coordinated with China, can provide an excuse for China to avoid cooperation with us on the enforcement of existing sanctions and the development of new ones. Finally, I do not see the value of such rhetoric in pushing Kim Jong Un toward negotiation; the rhetorical barbs seem far more likely to lead to an unintended escalation of the conflict that ultimately puts our troops on the peninsula in danger.

Second, I would coordinate, coordinate, and coordinate with our allies first and foremost, and then China to the extent feasible. At the end of the day, we cannot resolve the North Korea challenge without the help of the allies and China. Furthermore, if we are to move forward on the policy initiative outlined above, there are going to be points at which our allies will feel exposed and concerned, and given the threat that they are facing, it is hard to blame them. President Moon has indicated greater willingness than many of his predecessors to engage and thus is more likely to support the approach I have outlined but he will be even more supportive, if he can trust us to consistently coordinate and tell them what we are doing at every stage. With such coordination and trust, the Republic of Korea and Japan are less likely to move toward self-help solutions, such as their own nuclear weapons program, and more likely to give us room to

do things unilaterally that they might otherwise be uncomfortable with and that might help us to achieve our policy objectives, such as modify our annual military exercise in the context of a freeze.

Third, I would not walk away from the Iran deal, as it will send the message that we cannot be trusted to live up to our commitments, and will almost certainly make it harder to enter into negotiations with the DPRK over their nuclear program. Now, I am obviously biased here – I believe the Iran deal was good policy and that it is in the best interest of the United States to support the deal but I do not intend to turn this into a discussion of the deal. I would just say that if we refuse to hold up our end of the bargain, particularly a commitment made to an adversary regarding their nuclear program, despite the fact that they are complying with the bargain we struck, I cannot imagine that it would not have an impact on the DPRK's calculus as they consider whether to enter into negotiations with the United States regarding their own program. At the very least, it would give them greater leverage in the discussions to say that they cannot rely on us to follow through on our commitments and consequently, presumably they will demand that we front load our commitments before they are willing to do anything. And certainly Russia and China, who are part of the deal with Iran, will support the North in such comments given that we will have breached our commitment not only to Iran but also the P-5 countries, which of course includes Russia and China.

Finally, I just want to explain something I said at the beginning about why I think this approach is particularly likely to achieve success in the next few years, for those who question why pressure, which has yet to bear results, will do so now. I think it is more likely, not only because with each successive UNSCR on sanctions, and every other step made since 2006 to increase the pressure on the DPRK, we have slowly ratcheted up the intensity of the economic pressure on the DPRK significantly – but also because there are a number of shifts in the landscape that are likely to reinforce the approach I have outlined in different ways, including ones that will help to accelerate and intensify the pressure we bring to bear.

First, Kim Jong Un has leaned into fear and intimidation tactics to maintain his authority in ways that far exceed those of his father and grandfather. This is likely the case because he did not have the years that either of them had to build a network of loyal supporters through the government and consequently his approach to solidifying power was to exercise extraordinary brutality against any perceived threats and thereby deter further threats. This approach, while effective in the short term, carries with it a cost – one that he is consistently trying to mitigate and one that consequently may drive him toward a phased approach that carries with it the promise of small economic or legitimacy gains without costing him the program. Additionally, it is worth noting that his approach to power may ultimately make him more vulnerable to an overthrow and consequently is yet another reason to lean into contingency planning.

Second, China has been willing to partner with us more and more in applying pressure to the regime. While I would attribute this to, in part, a recognition of the fact that the DPRK's pursuit of nuclear weapons continues to have significant downsides, such as a destabilizing impact on the peninsula and driving us to increase our security presence in the region in ways that makes them uncomfortable as is the case with our THAAD missile deployment to the peninsula, I also believe that some of it comes from a very personal irritation among the Chinese elite with the

way in which Kim Jong Un has disrespected President Xi and China during the course of his reign. This disrespect has furthermore highlighted the fact that they are not fully in control of his actions, which may at some point turn against them.

Third, advances in technology have made it increasingly difficult for the DPRK to keep its citizens from being exposed to the world outside of the DPRK, which ultimately increases pressure on Kim Jong Un to find ways to strengthen the economy, increase international trade, and gives us greater leverage in pursuing a phased approach, while at the same time making it more likely that eventually the government is overthrown.

With this changing landscape, our diplomacy should have a greater chance for success and although I share the impatience felt by so many to find a solution to the threat we face from a nuclear-armed North Korea, I also have seen how over time diplomacy can have an utterly transformative impact on our foreign policy, addressing national security challenges without the loss of life that generally accompanies military action, which also tends to result in unpredictable and frequently negative long-term consequences. Given the series of bad choices we face, I do think we need to continue to give this approach further time and space to see if we are able to avoid the horror that the Chairman spoke of in the context of a military option.