

# Regime Insecurity or Regime Resilience? North Korea's Grand Strategy in the Context of Nuclear and Missile Development

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Last month, the Trump administration released the National Security Strategy (NSS), per the Congressional Act that mandates that the president must produce a document that “address U.S. interests, goals, and objectives; the policies, worldwide commitments, and capabilities required to meet those objectives; and the use of elements of national power to achieve those goals.”<sup>1</sup> The NSS is a recent example of “grand strategy” – which Michael Green, the former senior advisor on Asia for President Bush, notes “must incorporate diplomatic, informational, military and economic tools...[with] a clear prioritization of strategic objectives, long-term goals.”<sup>2</sup>

Green’s new book from which the above quote was taken is concerned with the grand strategy of the United States in the Asia Pacific, not that of North Korea, on which this paper will focus on. Indeed, the idea of grand strategy is often used in reference to the United States because of its economic, military, and political reach and influence and its

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<sup>1</sup> Nina Silove, “Beyond the Buzzword: The Three Meanings of ‘Grand Strategy,’” *Security Studies*, 28 August 2017, page 11.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Green, *By More Than Providence: Grand Strategy and American Power in the Asia Pacific Since 1783*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, p. 2.

ability to affect outcomes in the international system, and not at all on small states, much less the shrimp among whales like North Korea. But it is important to see how North Korea's national security strategy will be shaped by Pyongyang's perception of the external environment, especially Washington's approach to the North Korea nuclear issue and its relationship with its allies and partners in the region.

By some accounts, the Trump administration's NSS is a relatively coherent document that comprehensively outlines the national security threats and opportunities, albeit colored with the hues of "America First." There are several reassuring items in the document, in particular for those who study U.S.-South Korea relations. It references the importance of alliances, prosperity and freedom, and highlights a range of new and emerging issues that require collaborative action, including a robust discussion of cyber threats. Nevertheless, one expert observer has noted the regretful absence of "any overarching purpose, and the failure to explicitly embrace a U.S.-led rules-based order...an unwelcome break with 70 years of U.S. foreign policy."<sup>3</sup> Other scholars have pointed out the absence of the values of multilateralism, including the authors' putting blame on those global institutions for being the cause of many of today's national security challenges.<sup>4</sup> But generally, the document stayed within the mainstream of U.S. foreign policy."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Thomas Wright, "The National Security Strategy Papers Over a Crisis," *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/trump-national-security-strategy/548756/>

<sup>4</sup> Various, "Brookings Experts on Trump's National Security Strategy," 21 December 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/brookings-experts-on-trumps-national-security-strategy/>

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Wright, "The National Security Strategy Papers Over a Crisis," *The Atlantic*, December 19, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/trump-national-security-strategy/548756/>

While the NSS document itself is more or less outward-looking and reflects some conventional thinking on U.S. national security establishment, the president's speech that accompanied the NSS release was inward-looking, isolationist, and in many ways, undermined the tone and message of the NSS. Trump's message, like that in his campaign, is dystopian – a dark, dangerous place, where evil people are constantly trying to hurt Americans, their values, and way of life. His view of foreign policy continues to be transactional; in his remarks on the NSS, he said of NATO, "tens of billions of dollars more are pouring in because I would not allow member states to be delinquent in the payment while we guarantee their safety and are willing to fight wars for them. We have made it clear that countries that are immensely wealthy should reimburse the United States for the costs of defending them." Trump is isolationist and does not seem to be averse to unilateral actions, and his personal inclination trends toward authoritarian leaders or those with strongman tendencies, worry allies like South Korea and Japan and others. Moreover, reports of foreign policy dysfunction and the constant personnel changes with senior advisors, including rumors about the departure of the Secretary of State Tillerson, not to mention the president's inflammatory tweets, continue to sow confusion and doubt about the trajectory of U.S. foreign policy and Washington's commitment to maintaining world order.

Yet the NSS seems to reflect the convergence of views on North Korea between President Trump and his senior national security team, at least on the assumed goals of North Korea vis-à-vis its strategic intentions for its nuclear weapons program. President Trump since he came into office has identified North Korea as America's greatest national security threat, as Secretary of State Tillerson noted in his op-ed in *The New*

*York Times*.<sup>6</sup> The NSS states early on in the document that “North Korea seeks the capability to kill Americans with nuclear weapons”<sup>7</sup> reflecting the growing sense of urgency in the U.S. following Pyongyang’s testing of intercontinental ballistic missiles and its sixth nuclear test in the past few months. The document also echoed the comments of National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster who has said that the world is “running out of time of North Korea.”<sup>8</sup> The potential for war with North Korea is growing with each passing day; he said, “we’re in a race. We’re in a race to be able to solve this problem.”<sup>9</sup> As the NSS document noted:

North Korea is ruled as a ruthless dictatorship without regard for human dignity. For more than 25 years, it has pursued nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles in defiance of every commitment it has made. Today, these missiles and weapons threaten the United States and our allies. The longer we ignore threats from countries determined to proliferate and develop weapons of mass destruction, the worse such threats become, and the fewer defensive options we have.<sup>10</sup>

Such beliefs about Pyongyang’s goals – or grand strategy, if you will – are driving the Trump administration’s focus on maximum pressure, and in particular, its current refrain about the availability of “military options,” including “preventive war,”<sup>11</sup> and the U.S. willingness to use them. Senator Lindsay Graham’s comment that Trump is “ready, if necessary, to destroy [the North Korean] regime to protect America” and that “we’re not

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<sup>6</sup> Rex Tillerson, “I am Proud of Our Diplomacy,” *The New York Times*, December 27, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States, December 2017, page 7.

<sup>8</sup> Steve Holland, “World ‘running out of time’ on North Korea, Trump to tell Asia: White House,” *Reuters*, November 2, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-asia-whitehouse/world-running-out-of-time-on-north-korea-trump-to-tell-asia-white-house-idUSKBN1D22IG>.

<sup>9</sup> Alex Pappas, “H.R. McMaster: Potential for war with North Korea increases ‘every day,’” *Fox News*, December 2, 2017. <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2017/12/02/h-r-mcmaster-potential-for-war-with-north-korea-increases-every-day.html>.

<sup>10</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States, December 2017, page 26.

<sup>11</sup> Jason Le Miere, “U.S. Prepared to Launch ‘Preventive War’ Against North Korea, says H.R. McMaster,” *Newsweek*, August 5, 2017. <http://www.newsweek.com/us-north-korea-war-mcmaster-646942>.

going to let this crazy man in North Korea have the capability to hit the homeland.”<sup>12</sup>

Referring to conversations he has had the president, Graham predicted that there is a 30 percent chance that the US uses the military option and that if North Korea conducts an additional test of a nuclear bomb the probability of a U.S. strike against North Korea would grow to 70 percent.<sup>13</sup>

Graham also linked the North Korea threat with that from Iran, given the potential for proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The NSS, Trump, and other senior U.S. officials have also made the same connection. One Iran expert said that the NSS’s repeated linking of North Korea and Iran “recalls President George W. Bush’s notorious invocation of an ‘Axis of Evil’ in his 2002 State of the Union address” and “creates a false equivalence between two serious and legitimate security priorities that share some vague similarities – nuclear ambitions – but also vast differences.”<sup>14</sup>

Unfortunately, these beliefs conflate capabilities with intentions, and assumes a strategic intent – that Kim wants to hit the U.S. with a nuclear-tipped ballistic missile— that I do not believe currently exists. We should be watchful about how Kim’s ambitions might evolve in the future, but much of the warning from the Trump administration is hyperbolic and alarmist.

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<sup>12</sup> Sophie Tatum, “Graham on North Korea: ‘We’re headed for war if things don’t change,’” *CNN*, November 29, 2017.

<sup>13</sup> Uri Friedman, “Lindsay Graham: There’s a 30 Percent Change Trump Attacks North Korea,” *The Atlantic*, December 14, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/lindsey-graham-war-north-korea-trump/548381/>.

<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Maloney in “Brookings Experts on Trump’s National Security Strategy,” December 21, 2017. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/brookings-experts-on-trumps-national-security-strategy/>.

Pyongyang is probably aware of the growing risk of a U.S. military strike and Washington's refusal to engage with Pyongyang without the latter's willingness to meaningfully discuss denuclearization. Indeed, Washington and Pyongyang appear to be on a collision course, as the current U.S. administration's demands on North Korea requires a total capitulation of Pyongyang's decades-long goal of having a credible nuclear deterrent and survival second strike capabilities. Pyongyang now faces a situation in which their claimed reason for developing and advancing its nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities—deterring U.S. invasion and military actions—could very well invite a military strike from the United States. At the same time, North Korea's intransigence and aggressiveness despite U.S. threats of military force highlight how even the most powerful country in the world – and its national security strategy – can be undermined and constrained by a small, impoverished, and isolated country like North Korea.

### **North Korea's Strategic Goals**

Most experts and scholars seem to agree that North Korea's national security strategy seeks to ensure its independence and sovereignty under the leadership of the Kim family and to maintain strategic relevance and ability to drive events on the Korean Peninsula in a region dominated by larger, wealthier neighbors. (Judging from the swagger of Kim's New Year's address, he seems to think he is succeeding in achieving or solidifying these goals.) To achieve these enduring goals, Pyongyang has placed a high priority on the development of nuclear weapons, while maintaining its large conventional military capabilities, even as the country and the vast majority of its citizens suffer from poverty and food-insecurity. As the Director of National Intelligence

testified, “Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities are intended for deterrence, international prestige, and coercive diplomacy.”<sup>15</sup> In addition, Kim’s personal stamp on the nuclear weapons program, the regime’s public celebration of various technical milestones through parade, the promotion of the scientists and technicians, and photographs and media statements suggest that it is also a source of great domestic pride and a vital part of Kim’s brand. As a prominent political scientist has pointed out, Kim Jong-un has succeeded in accelerating nuclear weapons capabilities because of his determination to develop the technologies, elevating and encouraging scientists and tolerating failure as part of the learning process, and rewarding them with exclusive privileges.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the regime’s notorious opaqueness, the current Kim regime has been remarkably “transparent” in conveying what it plans to do. In addition to flouting the Leap Day Deal in 2012 with two satellite launches – one failed – and his first of four nuclear tests in 2013, Kim has sped forward on nuclear and ballistic missile development and has flaunted them through parades, state media statements, and photographs. He has also codified the North’s status as a nuclear-armed state by inscribing that description into the revised constitution in 2012, and in 2013 announced his *byungjin* policy, “a brilliant succession and development onto a new, higher stage of the original line of simultaneously developing the economy and national defense,” as the state media noted. The North also said, “When the Party’s new line is thoroughly

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<sup>15</sup> Director of National Intelligence, Statement for the Record for the Senate Armed Services Committee, Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community, May 23, 2017. <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/SASC%202017%20ATA%20SFR%20-%20FINAL.PDF>

<sup>16</sup> Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, “Why North Korea succeeded at getting nuclear weapons—when Iraq and Libya failed,” *The Washington Post*, January 2, 2018. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/02/why-north-korea-succeeded-at-getting-nuclear-weapons-when-iraq-and-libya-failed/?utm\\_term=.d59ae457f203](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/01/02/why-north-korea-succeeded-at-getting-nuclear-weapons-when-iraq-and-libya-failed/?utm_term=.d59ae457f203).

carried out, [North Korea] will emerge as a great political, military, and socialist economic power and highly-civilized country which steers the era of independence.”<sup>17</sup>

In the six years since he came to power, Kim has tested and pushed the boundaries of international tolerance for his actions, including a powerful sixth nuclear test with an estimated yield as high as 150 kilotons and ICBM tests this year, calculating that he can handle whatever punishment is meted out. And to a large extent, he has maintained the initiative on the Korean Peninsula, to the frustration of the United States and his neighbors. Kim has engaged in a rhetorical war with President Trump, not wavering in this public confrontation and consistently displaying his confidence that he can bully even the president of the United States. At the same time, he’s engaged in a steady drumbeat of internal purges, including the shocking public spectacle of the arrest and execution of his uncle-by-marriage Jang Song-thaek in 2013, and collecting a slew of titles, cementing his position as the sole leader of North Korea.

Yet North Korea has consistently asserted, as it did in the 2013 Law on Consolidating its Position of Nuclear Weapons State, that the regime’s nuclear weapons are for deterrence and that the reason for the North’s position is the United States. Kim stated at the time:

When one is firmly equipped with the capability to make precision strikes with nuclear weapons against aggressors and strongholds of aggression, no matter where they are on the face of the earth, no aggressor can dare to attack recklessly, and the greater and more powerful the nuclear strike capability, the greater the power of deterring aggression will be. Especially in the case of our

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<sup>17</sup> <https://nkaggregator.com/2013/04/01/law-on-consolidating-position-of-nuclear-weapons-state-adopted/>



country, whose opponent is the United States...it is necessary to firmly bolster the nuclear armed forces both quantitatively and qualitatively.<sup>18</sup>

Subsequent authoritative statements, including the North Korean foreign minister's remarks at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2017, have continued to hew to a similar line: "[North Korea's] national nuclear force is, to all intents and purposes, a war deterrent for putting an end to nuclear threat of the U.S. and for preventing its military invasion," he said, adding that Pyongyang's ultimate goal is to "establish the balance of power with the U.S."

As if there was any doubt, two weeks ago, Kim Jong-un in his New Year's address said, North Korea "as a peace-loving nuclear power...will not use a nuclear weapon as long as the aggressive hostile forces do not infringe upon our country's sovereignty and interests, and will not threaten any country or region with nuclear [weapons.] However, we will resolutely respond to any act of destroying peace and security on the Korean Peninsula."<sup>19</sup>

While advancing its nuclear weapons program, the Kim Jong-un regime has also rejected any sustained engagement or dialogue with the United States and its neighbors, including China, North Korea's primary source of political and economic support. This is a departure from the approach of Kim's grandfather and father who talked about their desire to work toward denuclearization to manipulate the regional environment. They also engaged in nuclear negotiations in exchange for political and

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<sup>18</sup> Kim Jong Un at the March 31, 2013, plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Worker's Party of Korea, KCNA, April 1, 2013.

<sup>19</sup> New Year's Speech by Kim Jong Un, *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2018.

economic concessions from the U.S., South Korea, Japan, and China. But under Kim 3.0, it has been “Fortress North Korea,” as Kim has rebuffed all efforts at engagement and has made it clear that his country’s nuclear weapons were not bargaining chips. He has also let the relationship with China fester, making only the bare minimum effort to maintain stable ties, and fueling debate in China about Beijing’s relationship with Pyongyang. Kim’s Fortress North Korea and his insistence on advancing and demonstrating nuclear weapons capabilities at breakneck speed have had real consequences on North Korea’s economy, given the tightening noose of sanctions constraining the regime’s ability to obtain hard currency. It is unclear if Kim recognizes that his actions have the potential to upend his nuclear ambitions, or if he knows what to do once he achieves the final goal of having a credible and reliable deterrent.

### **North Korea’s Evolving Strategy**

So what might North Korea’s National Security Strategy – assuming Pyongyang *has* a strategy—look like? I think the tone of the document – if it existed—would be dark, inward-looking, and suspicious of the outside world, while extolling the purity, optimism, and single-hearted unity, and self-determination (*juche*) of the North Korean people and the state.<sup>20</sup> Pyongyang’s consistent demands for the elimination of U.S. “hostile” policy as a condition for dialogue on denuclearization and its calls for peace treaty negotiations are insincere.<sup>21</sup> Instead, North Korea requires an unfavorable outside world as a way to legitimize the Kim regime, justify the pouring of scarce resources into the

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<sup>20</sup> B.R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves—and Why It Matters*, New York: Melville House Publishing, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Michelle Nichols, “North Korea says U.S. has to roll back ‘hostile policy’ before talks,” *Reuters*, May 19, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-usa-un/north-korea-says-u-s-has-to-roll-back-hostile-policy-before-talks-idUSKCN18F230>.

military programs, and emphasize the belief in its populace that North Korea under Kim offers the only safe place, given the malevolent forces lurking outside. President Trump's tweets and threats to "totally destroy" North Korea, the personal attacks against Kim Jong-un, and similar comments from senior U.S. officials<sup>22</sup> probably reinforce the regime's narrative about the alleged U.S. efforts to dominate or destroy the North Korean state. Such threats have the unintended effect of rallying North Koreans around the current regime and strengthening Kim. We should not underestimate North Koreans' sense of nationalism, their deeply ingrained fear of the United States, and their pride about the advances North Korea has made in its nuclear weapons program.

Furthermore, North Korea stands alone, for China cannot be trusted, given its support for U.S. sanctions. The Korean Workers Party is reportedly stoking anti-China sentiment through conferences and lectures, in part to place blame on Beijing's support for sanctions as the reason for North Korea's mounting financial difficulties. One party official allegedly told a conference, "although Japan is a century-old enemy, China is a thousand-year-old enemy."<sup>23</sup>

Thus, only Kim Jong-un can save the North Korean people and has the courage to stand up to the United States (and China). As he said in his New Year's speech, "a

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<sup>22</sup> The White House, *Remarks by President Trump to the 72<sup>nd</sup> Session of the United Nations General Assembly*, September 19, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-United-nations-general-assembly/>; Max Greenwood, "Haley: 'North Korean regime will be utterly destroyed' if war breaks out," *The Hill*, November 29, 2017. <http://thehill.com/policy/international/362448-haley-haley-north-korea-will-be-utterly-destroyed-if-war-breaks-out>; Zach Beauchamp, "Lindsey Graham: Trump 'told me' he will bomb North Korea if it keeps testing missiles," *Vox*, August 1, 2017. <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/8/1/16075198/trump-lindsey-graham-north-korea-war>.

<sup>23</sup> Jieun Kim, "North Korea Stokes Anti-China Sentiment in Response to Tougher Sanctions," *Radio Free Asia*, January 4, 2018. <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/korea/north-korea-stokes-anti-china-sentiment-in-response-to-tougher-sanctions-01042018161757.html>.

nuclear button is always on my office desk,” a reminder to Washington and the North Korean people that he alone has the power to deter a potential U.S. invasion and protect his people.<sup>24</sup>

As such, we should expect Kim to continue testing ballistic missiles and push North Korea’s conventional military forces to improve their offensive and defensive capabilities to raise the stakes for the U.S. in the event of a conflict on the Peninsula and to keep options open for threatening South Korea. Moreover, President Trump’s ongoing challenges to Kim’s manhood and threats to take military action against North Korea are unlikely to convince Kim to stop or slow development of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, particularly given Kim’s personal investment on their development and his desire and promise to be tough against the “hostile” United States.

While Kim Jong-un’s claimed goal for his nuclear weapons program is to deter a U.S. invasion, we should be clear-eyed about the how his vision for North Korea and his role in Korean Peninsula dynamics could become more offensive in the future, such as creating conditions conducive of unification under Kim’s rule. Kim’s inclination for violence and aggression and his use of repression and use of privileges and benefits to loyalists probably has encouraged sycophants and groupthink within his inner circle. Left to his own devices, Kim could blunder into a situation that leads to rapid and potential uncontrollable escalation, especially since he has almost no experience in negotiation and compromise in foreign affairs, given his Fortress North Korea approach.

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<sup>24</sup> New Year’s Speech by Kim Jong Un, *Rodong Sinmun*, January 1, 2018.

As Richard Bush pointed out, “the real danger [of North Korea’s pace and success in its nuclear developments] stems from the possibility of weakened alliances and unchecked escalation in the Korean Peninsula that could spiral out of control.”<sup>25</sup> Bush points to the “decoupling” issue—the possibility that if North Korea has the capability to hit the continental United States, Washington might be unwilling to risk San Francisco in order to save Seoul or Tokyo. Moreover, Kim’s confidence about his ability to deter the United States could lead him to believe that he can conduct conventional attacks against South Korea to probe Seoul’s resolve, expand the boundaries of international tolerance, sow division within South Korea, and drive a wedge in U.S-South Korea relations. North Korea could do all of these things without using any nuclear weapons—or for that matter, firing artillery.

As Bush rightly notes, the potential for another attack akin to those that took place in 2010 still exist, but let’s also remember that Kim Jong-un has been sharpening his other tools of coercion and testing international tolerance for them. Cyber is one of those tools. In 2014—around 60 missile tests and three nuclear tests ago—the regime said that the release of the movie by Sony, “The Interview”—a comedy depicting an assassination attempt against Kim—would be “an act of war.” North Korean hackers also threatened 9/11-type attacks against theaters that showed the film. Sony was a wake-up call for Washington, but for years, North Korean entities were reportedly

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<sup>25</sup> Richard C. Bush, “The real reason a North Korean nuclear weapon is so terrifying – and it’s not what you think,” *Order From Chaos Blog*, Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/08/09/the-real-reason-a-north-korean-nuclear-weapon-is-so-terrifying-and-its-not-what-you-think/>.

responsible for a number of cyberattacks on South Korean banks, military, government officials, and media organizations.<sup>26</sup>

Three years after the Obama administration blamed North Korea for Sony, the Trump administration in mid-December announced that Pyongyang was responsible for the WannaCry ransomware attack from May. Trump's Homeland Security Adviser said the attack was "widespread and cost billions" and "rendered hundreds of thousands of hospitals, schools, businesses, and homes in over 150 countries."<sup>27</sup> He also vowed that the U.S. would impose unspecified costs and consequences. North Korea is also reportedly turning its cyberwarfare to the growing cryptocurrency market, including the hacking of South Korean cryptocurrency markets.<sup>28</sup>

As the tough U.S. and U.N sanctions take effect, Pyongyang probably will increasingly turn to its cyber capabilities to circumvent sanctions and to obtain funds for the regime, in addition to using them to conduct espionage. The regime could also use cyberattacks to dole out punishment in response to perceived U.S. and South Korean offenses, threaten economic prosperity in the East Asia Pacific region, and undermine U.S. alliances. As the Director of National Intelligence said at the time of the Sony hack, "North Korea wants to be recognized as a world power" and they see cyber as a

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<sup>26</sup> Charles Riley and Jethro Mullen, "North Korea's long history of hacking," *CNN*, May 16, 2017. <http://money.cnn.com/2017/05/16/technology/ransomware-north-korea-hacking-history/index.html>.

<sup>27</sup> Homeland Security Briefing on WannaCry Malware Attack, *CSPAN*, December 19, 2017. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?438777-1/homeland-security-officials-blame-north-korea-wannacry-malware-attack&start=602>; Thomas Bossert, "It's Official: North Korea is Behind WannaCry," *The Wall Street Journal*, Op-ed, December 18, 2017. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/its-official-north-korea-is-behind-wannacry-1513642537>.

<sup>28</sup> Jung Min-kyung, "Cash-strapped North Korea turning more to cryptocurrency," *The Korea Herald*, December 19, 2017. <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20171219000926>.

“powerful new realm for them, where they believe they can exert maximum influence at minimum cost.”<sup>29</sup>

On the diplomatic front, Kim Jong-un’s outreach to South Korea on its possible participation in the Olympics, suggests he is looking to test Seoul’s willingness to engage on his terms, but major shifts in Pyongyang’s approach to dialogue are unlikely. Kim might see value in continuing to goad President Trump to issue additional imprudent, bellicose tweets to heighten South Korea’s concerns about U.S. willingness to gamble with their security and shape the narrative that Washington—not Pyongyang—is the source of tension in the region.

### **Undermining North Korea’s Strategy**

The opportunity to disrupt Kim’s ambitions and goals still exists. We should recast U.S. policy of maximum pressure and engagement, with a serious U.S. point of contact for negotiations, could create space for diplomacy that currently does not exist. It could also strengthen U.S. leverage against North Korea (and China) by harnessing collective efforts with South Korea and Japan; a successful North Korea strategy requires alliances that are demonstrably in lockstep on the approach.

The U.S. must signal clearly that it will pursue this strategy indefinitely and put in place (1) steps to demonstrate international unity of purpose and North Korean isolation; (2)

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<sup>29</sup> Remarks as delivered by The Honorable James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, “National Intelligence, North Korea, and the National Cyber Discussion,” Fordham University, January 7, 2015. <https://www.dni.gov/index.php/newsroom/speeches-interviews/speeches-interviews-2015/item/1156-remarks-as-delivered-by-dni-james-r-clapper-on-national-intelligence-north-korea-and-the-national-cyber-discussion-at-the-international-conference-on-cyber-security?highlight=WyJub3J0aCIsImtvcnVhliwia29yZWEncylsImN5YmVvYyJ2N5YmVvYyJlslidjeWJlcilslm5vcnRoIGtvcnVhll0>.

the infrastructure to minimize the threats posed by the North's nuclear weapons program, particularly those elements that show that Washington will not allow Pyongyang's coercive diplomacy to succeed; and (3) new tactics to increase stress on the North Korean regime. Steps that could support such an approach include:

### ***Strengthening international unity of action***

- Appoint and empower a White House envoy to manage the maximum pressure process, while presenting this individual as a channel for potential engagement. Thus far, the possibility for shaping North Korea's ambitions has been heavily weighted on military threats and sanctions. The appointment of a point of contact with President Trump's stated confidence could help to unleash the maximum pressure campaign on multiple levels by: ensuring coordination among allies and other international partners, including through shuttle diplomacy between Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow; invigorating efforts to compel countries to sever financial and diplomatic links with North Korea; making clear to North Korea and the world that the U.S. is prepared to engage on denuclearization; and reducing the possibilities for miscommunication and miscalculation.
- Such an individual would also be empowered to engage North Korea as necessary and appropriate, possibly to work on a road-map of confidence building measures.
- Convene five-party talks with South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia as a signal of international unity of purpose in addressing North Korea's proscribed programs.

### ***Minimizing threats from North Korea***

- In coordination with Seoul and Tokyo, develop a menu of actions that the United States, South Korea, and Japan are jointly prepared to execute in the event that North Korea continues on its current trajectory of nuclear and missile development. This menu could include covert and overt actions against North Korea, as well as steps that Seoul and Tokyo each would take to strengthen their own security if certain conditions are reached.
- With Seoul and Tokyo's support, the White House envoy would take this menu to Beijing to present the Chinese with a choice of either selecting where China



would be prepared to work collaboratively to advance the menu of actions, or stepping aside as the U.S., South Korea, and Japan move forward.

- Increase public visibility into the broad contours of new defensive capabilities that could be brought on line to mitigate the threat posed by North Korean weapons against the U.S. mainland and U.S. allies.

### ***Increasing stress on the North Korean regime***

- Make additional investments in programs that encourage further information penetration into North Korea. Injecting information and disinformation into North Korea would help to increase regime fragility or Kim's perception of regime fragility.
- Encourage overseas North Koreans to defect and to cooperate with international law enforcement in breaking up illicit networks and raise public awareness of the identities of North Korean officials that are implicated in human rights abuses.
- As part of the above, the U.S. and South Korea should craft and effectively disseminate to the North Korean populace, a credible, alternative vision for a post-Kim era. Currently, the North Korean people are well aware of the hardships that defectors face in South Korea and elsewhere; they also fear the loss of prestige, privilege, and potentially their lives if the regime were to collapse.
- Ramp up contingency planning efforts with South Korea, Japan, and possibly China. Consider forming working groups—managed by the White House envoy and composed of bipartisan groups of North Korea and regional experts—to discuss in a deliberate, strategic, and coordinated manner issues pertaining to collapse scenarios, including transitional justice, humanitarian and disaster relief, medical and operational capabilities in the event of chemical and biological weapons use, and refugee flows.
  - These working groups should also try to determine how to take advantage of existing North Korean bureaucratic structures and social organizations—for example, how the U.S. could exploit existing market relationships, local groups and networks, and military organizations.
- Work with China to shut down malicious North Korean cyber actors operating in China or using Chinese networks, and also the network of North Korean mules carrying contraband and hard currency through Chinese territory.

We can still test Kim's willingness to pursue a different course and shift his focus toward moves that advance denuclearization. As the prominent defector Thae Yong-ho has recently testified, "while on the surface the Kim Jong-un regime seems to have consolidated its power through [a] reign of terror...there are great and unexpected changes taking place within North Korea."<sup>30</sup> Trends in North Korea's internal developments, such as greater information penetration, marketization, and the growth of a moneyed class, will place stresses on the Kim regime and potentially overwhelm the regime as it buckles under the weight of internal contradictions and rising expectations. Moreover, international sanctions against North Korea have never been sharper and need time to bite. In aggregate, the recent U.N. Security Council resolutions, successful U.S. efforts to compel countries to cut off trade and financial links with North Korea, and the executive order authorizing broad secondary sanctions, have the potential to squeeze North Korea's ability to earn hard currency for the regime. Sanctions that undermine Kim's ability to reward elites and suppress the elites' ability to make money for themselves or raise money for loyalty payments to the regime could make Kim more willing to consider engagement to relieve that pressure.

Finally, investing in a strategy that incorporates diplomacy could give Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo an opportunity to cultivate a network of North Korean interlocutors within the regime who could, over time, become politically and financially invested in engagement and become a stronger voice in regime decision-making.

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<sup>30</sup> Thae Yong-ho, "Testimony of Minister Thae Yong-ho," (testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Washington, DC, November 1, 2017), <http://docs.house.gov/meetings/FA/FA00/20171101/106577/HHRG-115-FA00-Wstate-Yong-hoT-20171101.pdf>.