

# SINGAPORE AND BEYOND: OPTIONS FOR DENUCLEARIZING NORTH KOREA

ROBERT EINHORN

JUNE 2018

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

If the U.S. intelligence community and most non-governmental experts on North Korea are right that Kim Jong-un has no intention of getting rid of his nuclear and missile capabilities altogether, an agreement committing the North to complete denuclearization, whether rapidly or incrementally, will not be achievable. In that case, the realistic choice for the Trump administration will come down to pursuing an agreement that limits but does not eliminate DPRK capabilities in an agreed timeframe or abandoning negotiations and adopting a strategy of pressure, deterrence, and containment.

A pressure strategy would avoid the political risks and uncertainties of dealing with a country with a notoriously poor track record on previous agreements. But it would not prevent North Korea from making further advances

in its nuclear and missile programs. And with the current sanctions campaign already losing steam because of the optimism surrounding recent high-level diplomacy, it would be difficult to ramp up pressure strongly enough to force Pyongyang to denuclearize or to undermine the regime.

An agreement that stops short of eliminating North Korean capabilities would not ensure that complete denuclearization will ever be achieved, and it would be heavily criticized domestically. But it could impose significant limits on DPRK capabilities, enable U.S. and allied defense planners to better develop defenses against a constrained North Korean threat, gain the strong support of South Korea, China, and other key actors, and help create a more promising framework for pursuing additional measures to enhance stability on the Korean Peninsula.

## INTRODUCTION

After his June 1, 2018 Oval Office meeting with North Korean General Kim Yong-chol, President Trump said he didn't anticipate reaching agreement on the nuclear issue at a single summit meeting but "over a period of time," requiring one or more additional summits.<sup>1</sup> The president was essentially conceding that it had not been possible—and would not be possible at the June 12 meeting in

Singapore—to persuade the North Koreans to accept complete and rapid denuclearization. But it is not clear whether he has given up on the rapid elimination of North Korea's nuclear deterrent—and is now prepared to proceed with a more prolonged, incremental approach—or whether he remains insistent on rapid denuclearization, but now believes that gaining DPRK support for that approach will take more than one meeting.

1 Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump after Meeting with Vice Chairman Kim Yong Chol of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea," (speech, Washington, DC, June 1, 2018), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-meeting-vice-chairman-kim-yong-chol-democratic-peoples-republic-korea/>.

Whatever the explanation for the president's remarks, it is important for the administration, as it embarks on what is now being referred to as a negotiating "process," to carefully consider the pros and cons of three different models of denuclearization—rapid and complete, incremental and complete, and incremental and incomplete—and compare those models to the most realistic alternative to a negotiated outcome: a long-term strategy of pressure, deterrence, and containment.

## THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION'S APPROACH

At least until recently, the Trump administration has called for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization (CVID) of North Korea. Although the administration has not spelled out the details of CVID, it clearly has in mind a process in which, at a minimum, the DPRK's nuclear weapons, fissile materials, long-range missiles, and associated production and testing facilities are totally and verifiably eliminated in a short period of time, presumably during the current presidential term ending at the start of 2021, with Pyongyang rewarded only after denuclearization is completed, or at least well underway.

This is essentially the approach National Security Adviser John Bolton regards as the "Libya model"—a reference to Libya's agreement in 2003 to eliminate its nuclear, other WMD, and long-range missile programs completely and expeditiously, and to do so without any up-front rewards. To the North Koreans, the Libya model refers at least as much to the gruesome fate that befell Colonel Moammar Gadhafi in 2011, years after he gave up his nuclear program. Bolton's use of the term triggered an angry North Korean reaction suggesting that the summit might be scrubbed. In an effort to keep the summit on track, the White House has since distanced

itself from the Libya model. But in substance, if not in name, the administration's approach may still be based on that model—rapid and complete denuclearization while withholding benefits to North Korea until late in the game.

The administration knows that it is asking a lot from North Korea and says that it is prepared to offer a lot in return. On May 11, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said that, "if North Korea takes bold action to quickly denuclearize, the United States is prepared to work with North Korea to achieve prosperity on the par with our South Korean friends."<sup>2</sup> In addition to economic rewards, the administration is prepared to offer security guarantees, which could include conclusion of a peace treaty as well as pledges of non-hostile intent and non-interference in North Korea's internal affairs. President Trump may even be willing to consider ways to address Kim Jong-un's concerns about the survivability of his regime. "I will guarantee his safety," Trump declared in an Oval Office meeting with South Korean President Moon Jae-in—which would be an extraordinary commitment no previous U.S. president has regarded as either desirable or within the ability of the United States to enforce.<sup>3</sup>

Because the administration is concerned that Pyongyang will pocket any benefits and then not live up to its obligations, senior officials have indicated that the North will not reap rewards until denuclearization is well underway, if not completed. Secretary Pompeo explained in Congressional testimony that, "We're not going to provide economic relief until such time as we have an irreversible set of actions, not words."<sup>4</sup>

A key advantage of the rapid denuclearization model is that it would end the North Korean nuclear and missile threat sooner rather than later. Its

---

2 "Pompeo promises North Korea future 'brimming with prosperity' if it denuclearizes," *Reuters*, May 11, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-southkorea-pompeo/pompeo-promises-north-korea-future-brimming-with-prosperity-if-it-denuclearizes-idUSKBN1IC2GZ>.

3 Donald Trump, "Remarks by President Trump and President Moon of the Republic of Korea Before Bilateral Meeting," (speech, Washington, DC, May 22, 2018), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-president-moon-republic-korea-bilateral-meeting-2/>.

4 Nahal Toosi, "Trump team doesn't know what it wants from North Korea," *Politico*, May 31, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/05/31/trump-north-korea-summit-615252>.

supporters believe that Pyongyang's willingness to commit to prompt denuclearization would provide greater confidence that it has made a strategic and irreversible decision to abandon its nuclear deterrent than if it insists on prolonging the process for many years, which would give it an opportunity down the road to call a halt to denuclearization and leave the agreement if it later calculates that doing so was in its interest. Moreover, deferring rewards until denuclearization is well along or even completed would be a strong disincentive to North Korea pulling out of the agreement before the job is done. And rapid, complete denuclearization avoids what the administration sees as the cardinal mistake of past agreements with the DPRK: kicking the can down the road with partial solutions rather than insisting on decisive measures to solve the problem promptly and once and for all.

## IS RAPID DENUCLEARIZATION ACHIEVABLE?

North Korean acceptance of the Libya model would clearly be an excellent negotiated outcome. But it is misleading to compare North Korea and Libya. Colonel Gadhafi possessed illicitly procured equipment and technology for an enrichment facility, but his program had made little progress by the time he was confronted by the United States and United Kingdom and pressured to abandon his nuclear ambitions. It was possible in a short period of time to load the critical components of his embryonic nuclear weapons program onto U.S. aircraft and fly them to Oak Ridge, Tennessee.

By contrast, North Korea has produced a significant number of nuclear weapons (estimated between 20 and 60), a considerable amount of fissile material (both highly enriched uranium and plutonium), and a wide range of missile delivery systems (including Hwasong-series intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs). It has numerous facilities involved in the development, production, and testing of nuclear weapons and missiles, some of them located at the known nuclear complex at Yongbyon, but many

located at undeclared sites elsewhere in the DPRK. Given the size of the North Korean program and the secrecy in which it is shrouded, the task of completely and verifiably eliminating the DPRK's nuclear and missile capabilities in a matter of a year or two is simply not feasible.

The denuclearization process will involve detailed declarations by Pyongyang regarding quantities of nuclear weapons, fissile materials, and accountable missiles<sup>5</sup> as well as the locations of all related production, testing, and storage facilities. Then will come the critical task of verifying whether North Korea's declarations are accurate and complete, which will presumably be performed by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), perhaps assisted by a special IAEA unit (or separate organization) consisting of nuclear weapon state personnel allowed to have access to nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons-related information.

Interactions between North Korean authorities and verification professionals will be time-consuming and potentially confrontational. The North Koreans will be asked to clarify, supplement, or correct their declarations and will be pressed to account for any discrepancies between information they provide and information available to the verification organization, including information supplied by U.S. and other intelligence agencies. Access to suspect locations will be required to verify whether Pyongyang has failed to declare relevant facilities.

Under the best of circumstances—with a cooperative and transparent country—this process could take a few years. It took that long with South Africa, which unilaterally dismantled its small arsenal of a half-dozen nuclear weapons and had to provide a credible accounting to the IAEA that its program was truly eliminated. With North Korea, where verification will resemble a cat-and-mouse game, it will take significantly longer.

---

5 The Trump administration has focused primarily on ICBM-range North Korean missiles. But restrictions could also apply to short- and medium-range missiles, an approach strongly supported by Japan.

Another challenge to rapid denuclearization is the task of dismantling or removing North Korea's nuclear weapons, materials, and facilities. While removal of nuclear weapons and fissile materials from North Korea for subsequent dismantling of the weapons and disposition of the fissile materials could be accomplished relatively quickly, the disablement, dismantlement, or conversion of nuclear weapons-related facilities to peaceful uses would take much longer. A recent report published by Stanford University estimates that complete denuclearization could take 10-15 years to accomplish.<sup>6</sup>

But the inability to do the job in a couple of years is not the only obstacle to rapid denuclearization. More fundamentally, North Korea has made clear that it is firmly opposed to the Libya model—and not just to what happened to Gadhafi, but also to the idea of eliminating its nuclear program quickly.

In a May 16 statement, North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Kye-gwan ridiculed the idea of applying the Libya model to his country. He said, “It is absolutely absurd to dare to compare the DPRK, a nuclear weapon state, to Libya, which had been at the initial state of nuclear development,” and he denounced the “formula of ‘abandoning nuclear weapons first, compensating afterwards.’”<sup>7</sup>

At this point, the administration's allegiance to rapid denuclearization along the lines of the Libya model is uncertain. Asked at a May 22 meeting with President Moon whether denuclearization should be all-in-one or incremental with incentives along the way, Trump replied that, while it would be better if it were all-in-one, there are “some physical reasons” why North Korea “may not be able to do exactly that.”<sup>8</sup>

## A PHASED APPROACH TO COMPLETE DENUCLEARIZATION

An alternative to rapid and complete denuclearization is phased and complete denuclearization—that is, achieving complete denuclearization but on a more prolonged, step-by-step basis, with compensation to North Korea at each step along the way. A phased approach could, for example:

- start with measures that would be easiest for Pyongyang to accept and relatively easy to verify (e.g., ban on testing nuclear weapons and flight-testing long-range missiles, suspension and monitoring of nuclear activities at the known Yongbyon nuclear complex, ban on exports of nuclear and missile technology);
- proceed to more comprehensive, strategically meaningful, and harder-to-verify measures (e.g., declaration of all activities and facilities anywhere in the DPRK associated with the production of fissile materials and accountable missiles, verification of that declaration; termination of those activities, disablement/decommissioning of those facilities);
- continue by establishing a credible baseline for denuclearization (e.g., declaring and verifying inventories of nuclear weapons, fissile materials, and accountable missiles); and
- culminate in the phased removal and dismantlement of all nuclear weapons, fissile materials, and accountable missiles.

The process could be broken up into more or fewer stages. There would be agreed timeframes for each stage and for the entire denuclearization process.

---

6 Siegfried S. Hecker, Robert L. Carlin, and Elliot A. Serbin, “A technically-informed roadmap for North Korea's denuclearization,” Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, May 28, 2018, [https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/hecker\\_carlin-serbin\\_denuc\\_rlc.pdf](https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/hecker_carlin-serbin_denuc_rlc.pdf).

7 “North Korea's Full Statement on Meeting with Trump,” *The New York Times*, May 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/15/world/asia/north-korea-statement-trump.html>.

8 Donald Trump, “Remarks by President Trump and President Moon.”

The Stanford report outlines a roadmap to phased denuclearization and suggests that the process would take at least 10 years to complete.

In a phased approach, North Korean incremental steps toward denuclearization would be rewarded by incremental benefits provided by the United States and other parties. Just as early denuclearization steps would be relatively easy for the North Koreans, early compensatory measures could be relatively easy for the United States and its partners to provide (e.g., humanitarian assistance, commitment to no new sanctions, adjustments in certain U.S.-allied joint military exercises, declarations of non-hostile intent). Reversible denuclearization steps would be matched by reversible rewards. And just as North Korea could keep its nuclear weapons and materials until the final stage, the United States and its partners would withhold the most significant benefits until the final stage (e.g., major removal of sanctions, signing of a peace treaty, establishment of full U.S.-DPRK diplomatic relations). (For another example of a phased approach to denuclearization, see my Brookings colleague Michael O'Hanlon's recent piece, "A step-by-step plan for denuclearizing North Korea."<sup>9</sup>)

The chief argument for the phased approach is that it is more likely to be accepted by North Korea than the Libya model. In addition, even though it defers complete denuclearization to a later stage, it can cap and halt the momentum of DPRK programs in the near term. By proceeding incrementally, it gives the United States ample opportunity, at each stage, to evaluate North Korea's performance and the seriousness of its commitment before conferring on it increasingly significant benefits. In that connection, doling out compensatory measures incrementally, as North Korea fulfills its obligations, may be more acceptable to the Congress and American public than providing such benefits all at once without having a lengthy track record to assess how durable the agreement will prove to be.

Advocates of the rapid denuclearization model, however, believe the phased approach has serious pitfalls. In particular, they maintain that an approach phased over many years that gives generous benefits to North Korea along the way would provide little assurance that complete denuclearization will ever be achieved. They are concerned that the North would accept temporary limitations on its programs in order to undercut the current maximum pressure campaign, but would eventually decide, after reaping a significant share of the agreement's benefits, to leave the agreement and resume its nuclear and missile programs at a time of its choosing.

China supports the phased approach, probably because it believes the incremental model is the only approach to complete denuclearization that stands any chance of gaining North Korea's approval. After Kim Jong-un's second visit to Beijing on May 8, Chinese authorities implicitly endorsed the phased approach by issuing a statement indicating that Kim wants the United States and North Korea to take "phased and synchronous measures" that could "eventually achieve denuclearization."<sup>10</sup>

South Korean President Moon Jae-in would clearly prefer rapid denuclearization but probably shares China's strong doubts that it is achievable. While he is reluctant, at least in public, to take issue with the Trump administration's support for completing the process in a couple of years, he has signaled on a number of occasions that he regards a phased approach, with reciprocal benefits at each stage, as realistic and acceptable.

However, this second option of phased denuclearization is unlikely to be achievable. North Korea would presumably prefer incremental denuclearization to rapid denuclearization. But it is unlikely to regard any path to complete denuclearization as acceptable, whether achieved quickly or more gradually.

---

9 Michael O'Hanlon, "A step-by-step plan for denuclearizing North Korea," *Brookings Institution*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/14/a-step-by-step-plan-for-denuclearizing-north-korea>.

10 Jane Perlez, "Kim's Second Surprise Visit to China Heightens Diplomatic Drama," *The New York Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/asia/kim-jong-un-xi-jinping-china-north-korea.html>.

Most experts on North Korea strongly doubt that Kim Jong-un has any intention of entirely giving up his regime's nuclear weapons, an assessment shared by the U.S. intelligence community. My Brookings colleague Jonathan Pollack points out that, at an April 20 Korean Workers' Party Plenum, Kim Jong-un praised "the completion of the state's nuclear armed forces" and declared that "our country ... has been reborn as a world class nuclear power"—not the words, Pollack notes, that someone intent on dismantling his nuclear capabilities would use.<sup>11</sup> It is widely assumed that, when Kim Jong-un spoke in recent weeks and months to South Koreans, Chinese, and Russians about his commitment to denuclearization, he had in mind the North's long-standing definition of denuclearization, which links North Korea's willingness to get rid of nuclear weapons to conditions he knows to be unacceptable to the United States, such as the removal of U.S. military forces from South Korea or the termination of the U.S.-South Korean military alliance.

It is not publicly known whether Kim Yong-chol, in his recent conversations with Trump and Pompeo, was explicit about whether North Korea is prepared to give up its nuclear deterrent. It is also unclear whether his visit to the United States, whatever he said during those conversations, has altered the Trump administration's determination to persuade the DPRK to accept complete denuclearization.

## **INCREMENTAL AND INCOMPLETE DENUCLEARIZATION**

If Kim Jong-un makes clear at the June 12 summit meeting, and perhaps additional summits, that he is not prepared to commit to complete denuclearization, whether rapid or more gradual, the instinct of many observers, including senior figures in the Trump administration, will be to abandon the negotiating track altogether. But before throwing in the towel on negotiations, consideration should be given to a third alternative: an agreement that

would require North Korea to limit and even reduce its nuclear and missile capabilities, but would stop short of requiring their complete elimination in an agreed timeframe.

Like the second option—incremental and complete denuclearization—this approach would proceed step by step, with limits on North Korean nuclear and missile capabilities matched at each stage by economic and security benefits for Pyongyang. At a minimum, an agreement along these lines would cap DPRK capabilities by banning the testing of nuclear weapons and certain categories of missiles and requiring the declaration and verified suspension of all enrichment-related and reprocessing-related activities anywhere in the DPRK. Like the first two options, it would prohibit North Korean exports of nuclear and missile equipment and technology and address the chemical and biological weapons threat. In addition, it might go beyond a cap to require a reduction in the numbers of nuclear weapons and accountable missiles, and perhaps also the decommissioning or dismantlement of certain facilities associated with the production of nuclear weapons or missiles.

The agreement would contain a commitment to the goal of complete denuclearization and call for further negotiations to pursue that outcome. However, it would not specify a deadline for reaching that eventual goal. Instead, it would leave open, for subsequent agreement, the question of how and when the process would be completed. Until such a subsequent agreement is reached and implemented, North Korea would continue to possess a nuclear deterrent capability. It might be required to turn over a number of nuclear weapons for dismantlement and some stocks of fissile material for disposition, but it would be allowed, for the time being, to keep the remainder as a deterrent.

---

11 Jonathan D. Pollack, "The Korean nuclear roller coaster: has time run out for an agreement?" *Brookings Institution*, May 29, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/29/the-korean-nuclear-roller-coaster-has-time-run-out-for-a-summit/>.

As in the model of incremental and complete denuclearization, Pyongyang would receive compensation at each stage of the process. But because it would have been unwilling to accept a timeframe for complete denuclearization, the rewards it would receive for partial denuclearization would be much more modest.

This approach would receive plenty of criticism. The critics would argue that a paper commitment to the eventual goal of complete denuclearization is meaningless and unenforceable and that this approach would be even less likely than the “incremental and complete” option to result in the total elimination of the DPRK’s nuclear and missile capabilities. In their view, this option would therefore constitute de facto acceptance of North Korea’s nuclear weapons capability. They would warn that a partial deal would result in a significant relaxation of international pressures against Pyongyang, reducing the leverage needed both to compel North Korea’s compliance with the agreement and to pressure it to move beyond interim limits to complete denuclearization. The critics can also be expected to object to rewarding North Korea for a partial measure, even if the rewards are modest.

## **STRENGTHENING THE “INCREMENTAL AND INCOMPLETE” OPTION**

If, as most experts expect, North Korea rejects both the rapid and incremental models of complete denuclearization, this third option may be the only negotiated solution available. But while it is more achievable than the first two options, it falls short of the ambitious goal that the Trump administration, its Asian allies, and even the Chinese government have publicly articulated. To make this third option more palatable, it could be strengthened in several ways.

A major criticism of a phased process, as it is typically conceived, is that requiring North Korea to take only relatively easy steps at the beginning would provide little confidence that it is serious about limiting and reducing, not to mention eliminating, its nuclear weapons and missile capabilities. So, in

addition to such “easy” steps as banning nuclear and missile tests and suspending nuclear activities at Yongbyon, North Korea should be required at the outset to take steps that demonstrate greater commitment to the denuclearization process—for example, turning over a number of nuclear weapons and Hwasong-series missiles for elimination and admitting IAEA inspectors to some previously undeclared enrichment-related facilities. While small steps along these lines would not constitute major headway toward denuclearization, they would demonstrate Kim Jong-un’s readiness to cross previous red lines and overcome internal resistance to meaningful measures. Taking such steps at an early stage could, to some extent, reduce U.S. concerns that those red lines (e.g., DPRK unwillingness to reduce nuclear weapons inventories, refusal to acknowledge covert facilities) would become the reasons for North Korea later renegeing on its commitments.

While pressing Pyongyang to take early steps to demonstrate its seriousness, the United States should expect the North Koreans to seek similar early gestures of U.S. willingness to make good on promised compensatory measures.

Not only should the parties consider front-loading some significant measures as tokens of good faith at the outset, to strengthen this third option, they should also consider taking such steps throughout the process. A phased approach has often been conceived of as a progression of distinct activities of increasing strategic importance—for example, first a testing halt, followed by the verified declaration and suspension of fissile material and missile production, then the decommissioning of production facilities, followed by the declaration and verification of weapons and materials inventories, and finally the removal and elimination of the weapons and materials. But such a discrete sequencing may give North Korea an opportunity to opt out of the agreement before the most consequential measures have even begun.

Instead of arranging the various activities strictly on a sequential basis, several could take place concurrently and proceed throughout the agreement. For example, even before North Korea had fully declared its nuclear and missile production facilities and the verification professionals had evaluated the accuracy and completeness of that declaration, the process of suspending activities at an initial group of newly declared facilities could begin and proceed incrementally. Similarly, even before a baseline of weapons and materials had been fully declared and verified, the process of reducing those inventories could get underway and proceed throughout the process. Arranging the various steps in this manner would assure the United States and its partners that the most significant steps toward denuclearization would be distributed more evenly during the agreement and would not be put off until the end.

Similarly, the North Koreans will insist that their compensation be distributed throughout the agreement and not left until the end. The United States can meet that desire by dividing categories of rewards into several increments and making them available throughout the process. For example, normalization of U.S.-DPRK relations can begin with modest steps such as the opening of liaison offices in the capitals and end with the opening of embassies and exchange of ambassadors, with several steps in between. Sanctions relief can also be divided into incremental steps, beginning with a commitment not to adopt new sanctions and continuing with the relaxation of increasingly consequential sanctions measures.

Pursuing denuclearization steps concurrently rather than sequentially could also address concerns about the length of the process. While there are some unavoidable long poles in the tent—especially verifying whether North Korea has provided accurate declarations of its weapons, materials, and facilities—it may be possible to accelerate the process and reach key milestones significantly earlier.

It may also be possible to make the agreement's commitment to the eventual goal of complete denuclearization somewhat more credible. Instead of simply terminating progress toward denuclearization at a certain stage—requiring future negotiations on the nature and timing of follow-on steps to reach complete denuclearization—the original agreement could contain a roadmap that provides for complete denuclearization by a certain date but requires the parties, after a certain stage of the process has been reached, to give their consent before they would be obliged to continue following the roadmap to completion.

Such a structure would still allow North Korea to freeze the process by withholding its consent. But agreement on a detailed, time-bound roadmap to complete denuclearization would create a stronger presumption that the parties will fully implement the roadmap and perhaps increase the political cost to the DPRK of withholding its consent. A variant of this approach—which would create an even stronger presumption—would obligate the parties to continue following the roadmap to complete denuclearization unless one of the parties decides, at a certain stage of the process, to suspend further progress. In other words, North Korea would have to take responsibility for exercising a veto and bringing the process of denuclearization to a halt.

## COMPARING THE MOST REALISTIC ALTERNATIVES

Any agreement that limits but does not commit North Korea to eliminating its nuclear and missile capabilities completely—even if strengthened along the lines suggested here—will be controversial. However, such an agreement should not be compared to negotiated outcomes that are clearly better but most likely unattainable, such as the rapid or incremental models of complete denuclearization. Instead, it should be compared to its most realistic alternative: a strategy of pressure, deterrence, and containment—and regime change.



If Kim Jong-un rejects complete denuclearization on June 12 and at possible follow-on summit meetings, there will be support in the White House and among some outside observers for pivoting to such a strategy. Advocates of abandoning negotiations would argue that, given North Korea's track record of reneging or cheating on previous agreements, an agreement with such an untrustworthy regime, especially an agreement that puts off complete denuclearization to a distant and uncertain future, would have little prospect of serving U.S. interests. They would maintain that, after leaving the negotiating table, immense pressures could be mobilized that could compel Kim Jong-un to reconsider his negotiating position and accept a total ban or, in the event the North does not come back to the table, could deny it the resources it needs for its nuclear and missile programs, deter its provocative behavior, weaken the regime, and perhaps lead to its demise.

While such a strategy would avoid the uncertainties and political risks of an agreement that does not eliminate North Korea's nuclear deterrent altogether, it would have significant downsides. In the absence of negotiated limits, it essentially concedes that North Korea would be free to advance its nuclear and missile programs well into the future. Pyongyang could expand its stocks of fissile materials, which would allow it to build more nuclear weapons (or sell such materials to foreign buyers). A resumption of nuclear testing would enable it to further miniaturize its nuclear weapons, giving it additional deployment options, including the ability to produce multiple-warhead missiles and nuclear warheads with a range of explosive yields. And further missile flight-testing would allow North Korea to improve the accuracy and reliability of its missiles and to work on means of penetrating U.S. and allied missile defenses.

Moreover, mobilizing strong pressures could prove very difficult. If Kim Jong-un is prepared to accept an agreement limiting North Korean capabilities and such an agreement is rejected by the United States, support for enforcing sanctions against North Korea would drop off significantly. China and

Russia would be especially difficult to persuade to strengthen sanctions. South Korea's Moon Jae-in appears committed to sustaining current momentum in North-South relations and will also be very reluctant to ramp up pressures.

Kim Jong-un's charm offensive and the optimism surrounding recent high-level diplomacy have taken much of the wind out of the sails of the Trump administration's maximum pressure campaign. North Korea's usual commercial partners are now preparing for a relaxation of sanctions, not for a further tightening of them. There are reports that sanctions enforcement has already begun to erode. The unified international support for pressuring North Korea that developed in the wake of its alarming thermonuclear and ICBM tests has largely unraveled and would be difficult to reinvigorate if the United States pulls the plug on negotiations.

In addition, the U.S. ability to promote regime change in North Korea is very limited. Kim Jong-un seems to have succeeded in ensuring the loyalty of the North Korean elite through a combination of generous rewards and brutal intimidation. With the introduction of markets, the growth of a middle class content with their improving economic and living conditions, and the apparent popularity of Kim Jong-un, there is little basis to believe regime change is a near-term or even medium-term possibility. Moreover, after a lengthy period of strained relations between Beijing and Pyongyang, China seems intent on mending fences with North Korea. It remains concerned about the uncertainties and instabilities associated with regime change in the North and would probably go to great lengths to thwart any U.S. effort to instigate it. And with maximum pressure difficult to sustain, the United States will not have available the most effective source of leverage for weakening and undermining the Kim dynasty.

A phased agreement limiting but not eliminating the North Korean nuclear and missile threat also has its downsides, including substantial uncertainty that it would lead to complete denuclearization, the weakening of international support for

sanctions that would follow the agreement, and the domestic political costs of falling short of the high expectations that have been created in recent months.

But it also has some significant benefits. In particular, it would blunt the momentum of North Korean programs and impede further advances in certain North Korean capabilities, including the yield-to-weight ratio of its nuclear weapons, its stock of fissile materials, and the accuracy, reliability, and penetrativity of its ballistic missiles. These constraints would better enable U.S. and allied defense planners to develop and deploy effective responses to the DPRK threat, including missile defenses. Those responsible for defending allied territories and the U.S. homeland from nuclear-armed North Korean missiles would clearly prefer to work against a constrained and therefore less capable and responsive threat.

Such an agreement would also have considerable international support. China, Russia, and South Korea—and most other countries in Asia and around the world—would all welcome the agreement as a realistic compromise that places significant limits on North Korean programs and reduces the likelihood of a military confrontation on the Korean Peninsula. Japan, which has taken a hard line on the requirements of any deal with North Korea, might be reluctant to provide its support. But if the agreement addresses short- and medium-range missiles (at least banning their flight tests even if, unlike ICBM-range missiles, they are not eliminated) and if Tokyo is not required to shoulder the costs of compensating North Korea in the absence of a resolution to the abductee issue, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's government could be expected to go along.

Moreover, a partial agreement could bring benefits beyond constraining the North Korean nuclear and missile threats. The extensive interactions and monitoring arrangements required to implement such a deal could provide a greater window into DPRK intentions and capabilities than would otherwise exist. Such an agreement could also open

channels of communication that could be used to lower tensions, avoid dangerous miscalculations, and explore means of addressing a range of long-standing concerns, including the conventional and sub-conventional military threats posed by North Korea.

## A HARD CHOICE AHEAD

The Trump administration was right to downplay expectations of a dramatic result at the June 12 summit and instead look to follow-on meetings to reach agreement. Treating the Singapore meeting as a make-or-break event would have run the risk for the United States of either being pressured into hastily accepting an inadequate deal or seeing the process break down in failure when an initial meeting could not produce an agreement. The first summit, and perhaps subsequent summits and other high-level meetings, can now be used to probe North Korea's bottom line, and there will be more time to consider alternative means of addressing the DPRK threat.

Unless there is a major and unexpected change in North Korea's position, Kim Jong-un will reject complete denuclearization, whether achieved rapidly or incrementally, except if it is linked to conditions the United States and its allies would regard as unacceptable. In that event, the Trump administration will essentially have two options: abandon the negotiations and adopt a pressure strategy or pursue an agreement that limits but does not eliminate North Korea's nuclear and missile capabilities in an agreed timeframe.

The choice will be a difficult one. Both options are far from ideal. But the pressure strategy involves greater risks. It forfeits the opportunity to place near-term constraints on North Korean programs, holds out little prospect of generating pressures strong enough to compel Pyongyang to change its position on denuclearization or to promote regime change, and threatens to revive the tensions and fears of military conflict that prevailed during 2017. The limited agreement would not ensure that complete denuclearization will ever be achieved,

but it would be an important step toward that goal, would bound the North Korean nuclear and missile threat in the near term, would have the strong support of key regional actors, and could open the door to further measures to strengthen stability on the Korean Peninsula.

The Trump administration should explore whether such an agreement can be achieved on acceptable terms. It will not be easy. The North Koreans may reject sufficiently rigorous limitations, resist intrusive verification arrangements, demand unreasonable compensation, or refuse even to commit to the eventual goal of complete denuclearization. To improve prospects for an acceptable deal, the United States will therefore need to do everything it can to sustain economic and political pressures against North Korea and maintain unified support by U.S. allies, China, Russia, and other key states for a sound agreement.

If an agreement cannot be achieved on acceptable terms, the administration should be prepared to walk away from the negotiations and move to a strategy of pressure, deterrence, and containment. But having fallen back from its proposal for rapid and complete denuclearization and tried a less ambitious approach favored by South Korea, China, and others—and having failed because of North Korea's rejection of reasonable terms—the United States would be in a stronger position to gain the international support needed to pursue such a pressure strategy over the long haul.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Einhorn is a senior fellow with the Security and Strategy team 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.

Brookings recognizes that the value it provides to any supporter is in its absolute commitment to quality, independence, and impact. Activities supported by its donors reflect this commitment, and the analysis and recommendations of the Institution's scholars are not determined by any donation.