

# 1945

## Will North Korea Soon Test A Nuclear Weapon?

By Doug Bandow

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With its latest long-range missile test, North Korea is pushing back into the contest for the most dangerous international crisis. Last month, Russia leaped into the lead with its attack on Ukraine. Before that China and Taiwan looked like the world's most dangerous potential military conflict.

President Donald Trump's summitry with Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un defused a relationship highlighted in 2017 by "fire and fury" and the threat of US military strikes. However, détente lasted only a little more than a year, until the February 2019 failed Hanoi summit. Although the Democratic People's Republic of Korea maintained its voluntary suspension of intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) and nuclear tests, it ended serious negotiations with the US and the Republic of Korea.

Still, most policymakers expected Kim to use disruption and confrontation to gain attention from the Biden administration, which seemed inclined to follow its version of the Obama administration's "strategic patience" amid many competing priorities domestic and foreign. However, Washington indicated its interest in reestablishing contact, which Pyongyang refused. The DPRK's dismissal of South Korean entreaties was even more abrupt. President Moon Jae-in's variant of the previous Sunshine Policy was dead.

More ominous is the future which Kim appears to contemplate. He declared the necessity of defending the North from an aggressive US, announced an extensive wish list of new weapons, including hypersonic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles, and multiple warheads, began to produce some of the promised hardware, and said it was time to drop the test suspension. In late January the regime first appeared to check some ICBM components but not at full range.

The latest launch was probably the Hwasong 17, the largest existing liquid fuel missile that was displayed at an earlier military parade. Said Kim: the DPRK military planned to develop the "formidable military and technical capabilities unperturbed by any military threat and blackmail and keep themselves fully ready for a long-standing confrontation with the U.S. imperialists."

Although Kim has not declared his intention to stage a nuclear test, that would be the logical next step for Kim. There has been activity at the North's old nuclear site. This year is especially important symbolically for the Kim dynasty: 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kim Jong-un's ascension, 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of father Kim Jong-il, and 110<sup>th</sup> birthday of grandfather Kim Il-sung. Warned my Cato Institute colleague Ted Galen Carpenter: "if the Biden administration's ossified policy regarding bilateral relations doesn't change, Kim's restraint even on that issue is likely to expire soon."

Although North Korea already has a nuclear deterrent, it primarily targets its neighbors, as well as American territories and possessions. That might not be adequate in a crunch, at least if the US president shared Trump's view that a war "over there" in the Koreas wouldn't matter much. However, even he would have to take seriously an ability to target cities on the American mainland.

So now what for Washington policy?

-The US and South Korea have no answer to the North's increasing test regimen. Seoul convened an emergency National Security Council meeting and criticized the launch. Washington also denounced the test and imposed new sanctions. US Indo-Pacific Command urged Pyongyang to "refrain from further destabilizing acts." The process has the look of Kabuki theater. The allies know they are playing a losing role. None of the foregoing actions will have any impact on the DPRK's behavior. Kim almost certainly expected them and will pay no more attention to them this time than before.

-American policy toward Pyongyang has failed. Washington sought to isolate the People's Republic of China for only 23 years. One consequence was Beijing's intervention in the Korean War. Had the two capitals been in contact, it is possible that they would have restored the status quo ante diplomatically rather than through Chinese military intervention and two and a half years more of war. Keeping the North officially isolated for 74 years and counting has had no better results. The best that can be said for the last three decades of intermittent contact is that DPRK behavior has tended to moderate some during periods of engagement, even without any permanent result.

-Sanctions have become Washington's standard response to almost every international controversy, especially driven by Congress, where close to 535 secretaries of state wannabes act as if economic penalties are a panacea. Alas, sanctions have consistently failed to force foreign governments to change policies that they view as vital to regime survival or national pride. Sanctions helped get Iran and North Korea to negotiate, but only so far. And the persistent demand for war by leading Republicans—both Presidents Clinton and Trump apparently seriously considered taking military action against the North—cut the opposite direction, convincing regimes on Uncle Sam's naughty list that nukes are necessary for their survival.

-Although the Biden administration reiterated its commitment to diplomacy, it has no practical strategy. One US official commented that the DPRK must want to have that conversation. But it evidently doesn't. Demanding CVID—complete, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization—is a dead end. Most Washington Korea analysts believe Pyongyang has no intention of giving up its

nukes. The experiences of Iraq, Libya, and Ukraine all argue against doing so. Nuclear weapons also play an important domestic political role in the DPRK. The best hope for any progress likely is to shift to an arms control mode, seeking to limit the North's arsenal. However, so far no administration wants to admit reality.

-The failure to do so may have moved Kim to adopt a new strategy: eschewing engagement while bolstering his military capabilities. The Rand Corporation and Asan Institute warned that North Korea could possess a couple hundred nukes by 2027. Once the North has multiple scores of nuclear weapons and a likely if not certain ability to target American cities, Kim will be in a very strong position to insist on recognition of the DPRK's nuclear status and offer to cap his program in return for lifting sanctions, else he continues expanding his arsenal.

-Washington's deteriorating relationship with the PRC has reduced America's prospects for winning assistance from the only nation with practical leverage over the North. Beijing has never controlled its small, tenaciously independent neighbor except perhaps after intervening militarily in late 1950 to save the DPRK from military disaster. After that Pyongyang carefully balanced Russia and China. The latter paired its opposition to a North Korean nuke with its fear of a North Korean implosion. Although the Xi Jinping government was irritated enough with the North's nuclear and missile activities to support and enforce increased UN sanctions after Kim took power, the Trump gambit caused Beijing to heal the Sino-North Korean breach. Today the PRC has little reason to aid the US.

-This deterioration has been matched by a near collapse in Sino-ROK relations. A plurality of South Koreans continued to name North Korea as their nation's greatest threat, but an increasing number point to China. A majority figures that Beijing will pose the greatest threat within a decade. Moreover, one of President-elect Yoon Suk-yeol's most important differences with outgoing President Moon is over relations with the PRC. Yoon promised to be tougher, including cooperating with the Quad, the US-Japan-Australia-India grouping that isn't quite an alliance, but which is directed at China. So Xi is unlikely to offer Seoul a helping hand either.

-Allied inability to halt North Korea's nuclear development appears to be radicalizing opinion in the South. For the last decade, a strong majority of the South Korean population has supported the development of a ROK nuclear deterrent, with the current number above 70 percent. Although most of the South's political leaders remain opposed, they could shift as an ever-larger North Korean arsenal inevitably will bring America's defense commitment and especially "nuclear umbrella" into question. What US president really is prepared to sacrifice multiple cities and millions of people to defend South Korea? Hopefully, none would do so since that would manifestly be against America's interest.

The latest North Korean missile test requires Washington to shift its DPRK policy from ideological antagonism to pragmatic engagement, rather like the Nixon administration did with China a half-century ago. The US isn't going to denuclearize the North. Instead, Washington should promote a normal relationship like that with otherwise hostile states—diplomatic relations, arms control, cooperation when possible, containment when necessary. Regular communication is particularly important with potentially threatening adversaries, as Washington

should have learned with the PRC in 1950. Today's policy is outdated and counterproductive and will grow increasingly dangerous.

Given the South's enormous advances, there is no need for Americans to defend let alone garrison the ROK. It is long past time for South Koreans to do whatever is necessary in their view to defend themselves. And that includes developing nuclear weapons. "Friendly" proliferation by the South may be second best, but maintaining "extended" nuclear deterrence for the South is worse. US policy is increasingly implausible and will be kaput once the North perfects its capacity to target America.

The US approach to the Koreas is a failure. In a world of crises, Washington cannot afford to keep pushing Northeast Asia into the background. It could soon become the next crisis du jour and force its way onto the Biden administration's agenda.

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