



## North Korea Needs the Bomb to Protect Itself From America

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North Korea “continues to enhance its ballistic missile capability and possesses the technical capacity to present a real danger to the U.S. homeland as well as our allies and partners across the Indo-Pacific,” Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, recently told Congress. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin made a similar point: “We also face challenges from North Korea, a country with the ambition to be capable of striking the U.S. homeland.”

It’s true that the North is continuing to enhance its military capabilities. Before agreeing to meet with then-U.S. President Donald Trump, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un brought his nation within striking distance being able to target the continental United States. Although more testing is needed to perfect a North Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles, Pyongyang could hit American dependencies, such as Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, as well as Okinawa, Japan, which contains a Marine Expeditionary Force and many U.S. bases. (Other obvious targets of the North’s nuclear weapons are major U.S. allies, especially Seoul and Tokyo.)

North Korea’s quest for nukes has helped make it an economic disaster, turning it into a global pariah and diverting resources from economic investment. That’s one reason the country, as Kim admitted in public recently, is facing another critical food crisis. However, it now is an unofficial member of the world’s exclusive nuclear club.

Nevertheless, the mere possession of nuclear weapons does not mean it threatens America with them. North Korea makes no pretense of having global concerns, other than using diplomatic relations for profit when possible. In the abstract, the Kim dynasty has no interest in the United States or even the Western Hemisphere. Pyongyang’s priority is regional, especially avoiding domination by another power.

China exerted substantial influence (Russia less so) over the ancient Korean kingdom, long known as a shrimp among whales. Japan was a colonial oppressor during the first half of the 20th century. Most important today is North Korea's relations with South Korea, as the two states remain engaged in a de facto civil war, short-circuited by outside intervention in 1953. One reason China's importunities against North Korea's nuclear program fall flat is because such weapons help Pyongyang preserve its independence *from Beijing*.

However, the United States has intruded in Northeast Asia. America intervened in the Korean War, maintains forces in and around the Korean Peninsula, is prepared to intervene in a future conflict, and regularly threatens to wage preventive war.

Indeed, Washington's willingness to routinely oust governments on Uncle Sam's naughty list makes the United States particularly dangerous. Washington can't even be trusted to live up to a denuclearization accord, as Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi discovered a decade ago. The Iranians learned that one president's word does not bind their successor.

The North desires a deterrent. At the party congress earlier this year, Kim explained, according to a summary report by state media, that "Korea was divided by the U.S., the world's first user of nukes and war chieftain, and the DPRK has been in direct confrontation with its aggressor forces for decades, and the peculiarities of the Korean revolution and the geopolitical features of our state required pressing ahead uninterruptedly with the already-started building of nuclear force for the welfare of the people, the destiny of the revolution and the existence and independent development of the state."

That is a prolix way of saying Pyongyang needs the bomb to protect itself from Washington.

No doubt the North Korean regime sees other possible use for nuclear weapons, such as maintaining the military's loyalty and extorting economic benefits from neighbors. However, when it comes to the United States, nukes have only one practical purpose: deterrence.

Of course, there long has been a popular argument in Washington that the North Koreans are crazy and therefore might attack the United States. The movie *Team America: World Police*'s caricature of Kim's father helped reinforce the loony image. Despite the weirdness of the North's political system, all three Kims proved adept political operators, eliminating domestic opponents, manipulating multiple great powers, and riding the tiger through war, famine, and sanctions. None showed the slightest interest in dying atop a radioactive funeral pyre in Pyongyang.

Before the North developed nuclear weapons its primary deterrent against the United States was conventional and deployed *against the South*. Although the allies would win any war, the cost still would be high, especially to Seoul, just 30 or so miles from the Demilitarized Zone and vulnerable to artillery and missile attack.

However, this offered only imperfect protection. Some analysts argued that the artillery threat is overstated. Trump, among others, dismissed the importance of South Korean casualties, as they would not "die here." The presence of U.S. troops—and their likely deaths—was not a sufficient deterrent by itself, because even those concerned about the cost might decide that the price was worth it.

With the breakdown of the U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework and futility of later negotiations—for which the North deserves blame but not full responsibility—Pyongyang continued with its nuclear and missile programs. Today North Korea could have 60 or more weapons (estimates vary). A recent Rand Corp./Asan Institute report projected a much larger arsenal within the decade: “To simplify doing so, we estimate ... that, by 2027, North Korea could have 200 nuclear weapons and several dozen intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and hundreds of theater missiles for delivering the nuclear weapons. [South Korea] and the United States are not prepared, and do not plan to be prepared, to deal with the coercive and warfighting leverage that these weapons would give North Korea.”

Such a capability would move the North into the midrange of nuclear powers. Even then, there would be no direct threat to the United States. Pyongyang would still lack capability to initiate a first strike, and the North’s leader, whether Kim or someone else, wouldn’t plan national suicide by starting a war with Washington. However, the U.S. alliance with South Korea would be unsustainable.

The primary purpose of the so-called mutual defense treaty between the United States and South Korea is to deter or, if necessary, win a war with the North. However, North Korea’s leadership now possesses a devastating nuclear deterrent. And when better to use it? To paraphrase former U.S. Secretary of States Madeleine Albright, what’s the use of having this superb nuclear deterrent that North Koreans spent so much to develop if they won’t use it when Yankee imperialists invade?

So long as Kim (or his successor) believed that a war were winnable or a satisfactory settlement were possible, he likely would retain his nukes. However, if his forces were broken and in retreat, his calculations would change. With no saving *deus ex machina*, like China’s 1950 intervention, in prospect, there would be little reason to leave the nukes unused.

The Hoover Institution’s Michael Auslin warned in 2017: “While few believe Kim Jong Un would launch an unprovoked nuclear strike, most seasoned Korea watchers believe that he would no doubt use his arsenal once it became clear he was about to lose any war that broke out. As this risk increases, Washington will find it increasingly difficult to avoid reassessing the country’s multi-decade alliance with South Korea. The threat to American civilians will be magnified to grotesque proportions, simply because Washington continues to promise to help South Korea.”

Imagine 200 warheads hitting throughout the Pacific and North America. The United States had little choice but to risk an even larger exchange during the Cold War. America and the Soviet Union were at military odds around the world. No effective missile defense was (or is yet) available. Mutual assured destruction was a horrid doctrine but perhaps the only effective means of defense. After all, the alternatives appeared to be surrender or destruction. That is not the case with North Korea.

The potential of North Korea becoming a midlevel nuclear power puts a premium on negotiation. However, few Washington policymakers believe Pyongyang will ever fully denuclearize. Proposals for more basic arms control also might prove unavailing, in which case withdrawal would become the only way to avoid North Korea becoming a real nuclear danger to the United States.

No doubt, America's credibility as an alliance partner would take a hit. And gaining an ability to force Washington to back down would enhance the value of developing nuclear weapons. However, their worth already is enormous, as they are the only sure deterrent to U.S. military action. And maintaining alliance credibility is unlikely to ever be worth accepting destruction of America's homeland. Doubting Kim's seriousness as a negotiating partner, Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute recently argued: "To reduce the North Korean threat, we will need a program we can undertake on our own, with like-minded international friends, that does not depend on Mr. Kim." That would be best achieved by getting out of an impossible situation and turning South Korea's defense over to the South Koreans. America's withdrawal should not be precipitous, but it should be steady.

Despite Washington's continued reflexive embrace of alliances, North Korea's growing nuclear arsenal highlights the downside of America's security guarantee for the South. Absent unlikely denuclearization via diplomacy, continuing to protect South Korea will increasingly expose the U.S. homeland to possible nuclear attack. Nothing at stake in the peninsula warrants taking that risk.

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