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How Not to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb

A Realistic Approach for Dealing with North Korea's Nuclear Weapons

It is still early days for the Joe Biden administration's approach to foreign policy. There is much that has yet to be revealed—and likely at least as much yet to be decided. Every signal emitted thus far, however, suggests that the new administration will stick with its predecessors' approach to managing the nuclear arsenal of North Korea (formally, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea).

Whether designated *maximum pressure* or *strategic patience*, U.S. policy has remained, as the old joke has it, one of continuing the beatings until morale improves. Indeed, if insanity is doing the same thing over and over while expecting different results, the enduring expectation that just a little more coercive pressure will convince Pyongyang to surrender its nuclear weapons surely qualifies for that dismal diagnosis. At some point, the magical thinking that steadfastly ignores years of failure unmarred by even the faintest hint of progress must give way to a realistic appraisal of the situation and a shift in U.S. priorities away from trying to reverse the river's flow toward learning how to navigate the current.¹

The argument to be made here is simple and in two parts. First, considering the track record of Washington's attempts to deal with North Korea's nuclear ambitions, the overall experience of the world with nuclear-armed powers, and both international relations and economic

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theory, none suggests that, short of conflict or a regime change in Pyongyang, North Korea will be convinced to surrender its nuclear weapons. Second, despite concerns that a nuclear-armed North Korea could not be deterred, there is no reason to believe that deterrence will be any less effective with North Korea than it has been with every nuclear power since 1945.

Fail, Rinse, Repeat

While the full content of the Biden administration's review of policy toward North Korea has yet to be made public, there are multiple official indications that the policy will be of a piece with what has come before. For instance,

- In March 2021, a meeting of the so-called Quad—the United States, Australia, India, and Japan—resulted in a statement “reaffirm[ing] our commit-

ment to the complete denuclearization of North Korea” (O’Carroll, 2021).

- The Joint Leaders’ Statement issued after President Biden’s summit with Japan’s then–Prime Minister Suga Yoshihide in nearly identical language “reaffirmed” the two allies’ “commitment to the complete denuclearization of North Korea” (White House, 2021a).
- The May 2021 summit between Biden and South Korean President Moon Jae-in resulted in concurrence on the same objective, although the wording here was slightly different: that the mutual goal remains “the complete denuclearization of the *Korean Peninsula*” (White House, 2021c, emphasis added). This is the same language as in the joint statement from North Korea’s Kim Jong-un and former U.S. President Donald Trump after the 2018 Singapore summit (White House, 2018), but that statement was interpreted—at least in the United States—as calling for the denuclearization of North Korea only.
- Finally, the joint communiqué issued after the North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in mid-June 2021 called for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea—a reversion to the post-Singapore framing that stands in some contrast with that of the Biden-Moon statement (North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2021).

There has not been a firm policy declaration from the Biden team, but there are no signs of any significant change from the approach that prevailed at the end of the Trump years—which itself was a reversion to policies that had been in place, and failed, a decade prior.

Although the Biden administration has sought to portray its North Korea policy as different from those of its predecessors, arms control and non-proliferation expert Robert Einhorn of the Brookings Institution has characterized the administration as adopting “the tried-and-true public diplomacy technique of portraying its approach as the golden mean between two previously unsuccessful approaches” (Einhorn, 2021). He describes the Trump administration’s approach as a frustrated search for a dramatic “grand bargain” with Pyongyang and the approach of former President Barack Obama’s team as a “nothing for nothing” strategy of “strategic patience.”

The Obama administration’s policy of strategic patience rested on, in Van Jackson’s words,

a confrontational posture toward North Korea that combined deterrence and various forms of nonviolent pressure with a demand for “credible” negotiations aimed at North Korean denuclearization. (Jackson, 2019, p. 594)

Seen in these terms, and despite Trump’s rhetoric about his “nuclear button” being “much bigger” and Kim Jong-un being the “Little Rocket Man” (Gambino, 2018), Trump’s initial policy of “maximum pressure” on North Korea was more an honest rebranding of his predecessor’s approach than a radical departure from it. His mid-term switch to an approach characterized by highly personalized and high-profile summitry with his “good friend” Kim Jong-un, though making for good television, ultimately achieved nothing, even despite some modest North Korean concessions. By the end of its term, the Trump administration had reverted to something very like earlier coercive strategies, albeit with its own distinctive rhetorical flourishes and added sanctions.

A Recipe for Failure: Sanctions, Coercion, and Prospect Theory

The strongest signal of a lack of new thinking thus far on the North Korean nuclear dilemma came in President Biden’s statement to a joint session of Congress on April 28, 2021. In it, he referenced “Iran and North Korea [as] nuclear programs that present serious threats to American security and the security of the world” (White House, 2021b). This continues the long-standing rhetorical form of lumping together Iran’s utterly nascent nuclear program with North Korea’s very real arsenal of nuclear weapons.² Other than being associated with two countries long demonized by the United States, the two cases have almost nothing important in common. Speaking of them in the same breath is akin to comparing the consequences of *considering* having a child and those of raising an *existing* child. Thinking about the two countries’ nuclear programs in the same way is a categorical error, one with real consequences. For, although sanctions may be credited with some success in slowing Iran’s progress *developing* nuclear weapons, it is a long stretch to argue that sanctions therefore can be successful in *removing* an actual nuclear arsenal from North Korea.

In this paper, I begin by acknowledging the reality that North Korea has and is further developing an arsenal of nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Given this fact, I argue that, rather than continuing to fruitlessly pursue a chimera of denuclearization, the United States and its allies should instead (1) focus on deterring North Korea from employing its nuclear arsenal to either attack or coerce other states and (2) use a step-by-step series of negotiated agreements—what will be discussed under the rubric of

“something for something”—to cooperatively control further development.

To understand why it is almost certainly pointless to continue pursuing denuclearization, I start by briefly addressing the question of the overall effectiveness of sanctions and then consider how social scientists have come to understand risk propensity.

The political science literature on the effectiveness of sanctions as a tool of foreign policy is, at best, mixed. There appears to be no convincing evidence or arguments demonstrating that sanctions consistently achieve their intended results. Some argue that, although comprehensive sanctions can be made effective against democratic regimes, they may prove counterproductive when applied to authoritarian regimes, such as North Korea (Brooks, 2002). So-called smart or targeted sanctions, which aim to affect specific influential communities or even individuals, “are still likely to be a noble failure” (Drezner, 2003). Quantitative analysis reinforces the notion that sanctions are not reliable (Rarick and Han, 2010).

And, of course, in the case of North Korea, analysts and policymakers have the empirical evidence of more than 15 years of experience seeking to alter the nuclear intentions of “one of the most heavily sanctioned countries in the world” (Bartlett and Shin, 2021) with nothing to show for it.³

If the argument for the effectiveness of sanctions is ultimately unconvincing, why do they seem to bear at least some fruit in slowing Iran’s nuclear progress while failing so completely with North Korea?

The answer lies in the notion that there are two flavors of coercion: *deterrence*, which is convincing someone not to do something that they might want to do but

have not yet done, and *compellence*, which is convincing someone to give up something that they already have. The United States is seeking to *deter* Iran from developing nuclear weapons and seeking to *compel* North Korea to surrender them.

Why is this distinction important? Students of coercive theory long ago concluded that compellence is much harder than deterrence. There are several reasons for this.

First, in the words of Nobel laureate and seminal thinker about deterrence Thomas Schelling, “the threat that compels rather than deters often requires that punishment be administered *until* the other acts, rather than *if* he acts” (Schelling, 1966, p. 70). That is, punishment must also be sufficiently intensive or extensive to motivate the desired change in the target’s behavior; no matter how long you apply 5 pounds of force to lift a 10-pound weight, it is not going to move.

Second, deterrence requires the target to do quite literally *nothing*. The deterrer is seeking to *prevent* the target from acting. A compellent threat demands that the target take some action. And the threat must be sustained for the entire time required for that action to be completed. Merely getting North Korea to *agree* to denuclearization would not justify removing coercive pressure; only the completion of denuclearization would logically end the pressure.

Third, unlike deterrence, which entails laying a minefield and waiting “in the interest of inaction” (Schelling, 1966, p. 72), compellence demands that the *threatener* carry out the threatened action. Whereas deterrence has no time scale—one party is happy to deter the other forever, which is the whole point—compellence requires deadlines and positive action.

Fourth, deterrence imposes no painful costs to the target's reputation; like Aesop's fox, the target can always claim that it never wanted those grapes in the first place. Submitting to compellent pressures, however, requires a visible and potentially humiliating concession or retreat in the face of the threat.

Schelling summarizes the ideal compellent action as one that, once initiated, causes minimal harm if compliance is forthcoming and great harm if compliance is not forthcoming, is consistent with the time schedule of feasible compliance, is beyond recall once initiated, and cannot be stopped by the party that started it but *automatically* stops upon compliance, with all this fully understood by the adversary. (Schelling, 1966, p. 89)

Readers of course may judge for themselves how well the U.S.-led coercive campaign against North Korea has met these conditions. I suggest that it fails them all. After so many years of punitive sanctions—quite possibly the most stringent ever imposed by the world community against any actor—the lack of Pyongyang's movement toward compliance suggests that there is insufficiently “great harm” being inflicted. The U.S. demand that steps toward denuclearization be made before any relief is granted fails the “time schedule” test. In addition, the sanctions are not “beyond recall,” because they can be removed at any moment, and North Korea likely perceives no guarantee that they will be lifted if it does in fact move toward compliance.

This assessment drawn from coercion theory is buttressed by one of the most profound findings from the evolving field of behavioral economics: *prospect theory*—that is, how people assess their future situation relative

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to their present and how that assessment affects their willingness to take risks to shape the outcome. It has been demonstrated again and again that individuals will take substantially larger risks to avoid losing something that they already have than to gain something that they desire but do not yet possess (see, for example, Kahneman and Tversky, 1979).

Iran is in what is referred to in prospect theory as the *domain of gains*; that is, the United States is trying to convince Iran not to try to get something that it does not have yet. Prospect theory says that this posture reduces Iran's willingness to take risks to get nuclear weapons. In contrast, North Korea is in the *domain of losses*; that is, the

United States is demanding that North Korea surrender what it already has, which puts it, according to the theory, in a far more risk-acceptant mode. However difficult it may be to discourage Iran from further pursuit of nuclear weapons, U.S. leaders should expect that compelling North Korea to give up such weapons is a far harder task.

The long experience of seeking—and failing—to use crippling economic sanctions to coerce North Korea into renouncing its nuclear arsenal leads to one conclusion: Kim Jong-un’s arsenal is here to stay. To ask why he exposes his people to such punishment to retain nuclear weapons—other than what is almost certainly a general indifference to their well-being—is to ask simultaneously two other questions: Why do states build nuclear weapons

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in the first place, and under what circumstances have they ever given them up? The answers to both are relatively straightforward.

Nuclear Motivations

Every country that has developed nuclear weapons has done so for the same primary reason: to deal with fundamental security concerns that it did not perceive as being amenable to solution any other way. The following list reviews each situation:

- The United States developed the atomic bomb during World War II out of fear that Nazi Germany might build one first.
- The Soviets developed the bomb to prevent the United States from exploiting unilateral possession of it.
- The United States and the Soviet Union advanced from fission to thermonuclear weapons to forestall the other (re)gaining a one-sided edge.
- The United Kingdom developed the weapon partly to restore some national prestige after its post-war retreat from empire but also because it was strongly encouraged, and indeed abetted, by the United States in order to bolster the North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s deterrent posture versus the Warsaw Pact.
- France developed nuclear weapons also partly for prestige purposes, as well to offset doubts about the viability of U.S. extended deterrence guarantees and to support Paris’s transition to a more independent security identity.

- As it perceived that it faced threats from both an increasingly alienated Soviet Union and the longstanding hostility of the United States, China pressed ahead with developing nuclear weapons even after Moscow withdrew support of Beijing's atomic aspirations in the late 1950s (see, for example, Lewis and Xue, 1991).
- Israel, confronted with what it saw as an array of Arab opponents bent on its destruction, developed nuclear weapons to serve as a last-ditch guarantor of survival—much akin to how North Korea appears to be behaving.
- Apartheid South Africa, surrounded by hostile African states, sought a small arsenal of nuclear weapons whose use, Pretoria hoped, would force superpower intervention to stop any attack on South Africa. As momentum toward Black majority rule built and the threat on the country's borders decreased, the F. W. de Klerk government began dismantling its stockpile, a process that was completed in the early 1990s.
- India, in a development process spanning several decades, acquired nuclear weapons for their prestige value but also to have an ultimate deterrent to aggression from China or Pakistan.
- Pakistan naturally returned the honor.
- Finally, thus far, North Korea has overcome enormous international pressure to construct an arsenal as a deterrent against South Korea, its richer and more capable southern neighbor, but especially against any U.S. aspirations to impose regime change in Pyongyang.

There is little doubt that, in several of these cases, pride and prestige helped pique actors' nuclear interest; however, in every case, the country saw a compelling security reason that drove its decision.

In North Korea's case, it does not matter whether outside observers think that North Korean leaders' concerns are realistic—or legitimate. It also is not relevant that the North Korean regime may be the most brutal and repressive the world has seen in many years, perhaps ever. Or even that the United States desperately prefers that Pyongyang not possess nuclear weapons. Ultimately, this is neither a normative problem nor one of U.S. preferences but rather a basic reality: The North Korean regime appears genuinely to believe that it needs nuclear weapons to secure its survival. That is the uncrackable nut at the heart of this matter.

The Kim regime has learned what it almost certainly believes to be undeniable and worrisome lessons from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. In all of those cases, the countries' leadership was overthrown by U.S. (and allied) military power. And Kim Jong-un likely understands the threat to be very personal, because both Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Muammar Qaddafi of Libya lost their lives as a result of the defeat of their regimes.

What all three of those countries lacked, of course, was a powerful deterrent against U.S. aggression. The profound angst that North Korea's limited nuclear arsenal and unreliable long-range ballistic missiles have provoked in the United States must suggest to Kim that he indeed has successfully built such a deterrent. Given his regime's deep-seated perception of enduring U.S. hostility, he is and will remain highly unlikely to offer any concessions that would erode that protection, absent very firm security guarantees from Washington.

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Only four countries have ever surrendered an existing nuclear arsenal (although many have ended weapon development programs), and, in each case, some variety of regime change lay behind the decision. And a country has surrendered self-constructed weapons in only one case—South Africa, as described earlier.

The other three countries—Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine—were successor states to the Soviet Union that inherited chunks of the Soviets’ former nuclear arsenal when the Union fell apart. Fearful of Russia’s long-term intentions, Ukraine sought international security assurances before it agreed to surrender to Russia what was then the world’s third-largest nuclear arsenal. Consequently, the governments of Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States signed the Budapest Memorandum in December 1994 (Russian Federation, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and the United States of America, 1994).

Among the six guarantees provided to Ukraine (as well as Belarus and Kazakhstan) were the following:

- Respect the independence and sovereignty in the existing borders of Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.
- Refrain from the threat or the use of force against Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine.
- Refrain from using economic pressure on Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to influence their politics.

Russia has violated all three of these commitments to Ukraine, up to and including invading it twice.

This paper is not the place to argue how the West could or should have responded to Russia’s twin invasions of Ukraine in 2014. Rather, the hard lesson that North Korea likely drew was the unreliability of paper guarantees from the West in general and Washington specifically.

How Not to Dismantle an Atomic Bomb

The United States’ current approach is not the way to manage the nuclear threat posed by North Korea. That is, negotiating strategies that demand that Pyongyang renounce its nuclear capabilities as a precondition for discussions regarding security guarantees—as both the Obama nothing-for-nothing and Trump all-or-nothing approaches did—are almost certainly doomed. In the parlance of economic theory (and evolutionary biology) that has been adapted by the international relations academe, such demands can be seen as requiring North Korea to offer a *costly signal* of its good faith—concrete steps toward nuclear disarmament—in exchange for Washington’s *cheap*

signal of offering to talk. It is unsurprising that Pyongyang views this as a bad deal.

Expecting sanctions to be enough to change Kim's mind seems like a naïve hope. Nuclear-weapon-related sanctions were first imposed on North Korea in 2006 in the wake of its initial nuclear test; since then, the United States has been applying ever-escalating pressure and seeking to walk back Kim's nuclear policy by strangling his economy. These sanctions have greatly affected North Korea's economy, weakened its military, greatly increased the suffering of ordinary North Koreans, and even somewhat disrupted the lifestyles of the country's relatively pampered elites. However, the sanctions have yielded no progress whatsoever in the nuclear realm. As Haggard and Noland note,

The North Korean regime survived a famine that likely killed between 3 and 5 percent of its population [in the late 1990s]. It is doubtful that the major parties could coordinate [sanctions] action that would be nearly as consequential. (Haggard and Noland, 2017)

In other words, if it is irrational to expect a different outcome when doing the same thing under the same circumstances, anticipating success from the sanctions regime is, at best, wishful thinking.

Finally, U.S. leaders must stop expecting China to step in and somehow save the day. There is little doubt that Beijing would welcome the relative peace and quiet that would follow a successful denuclearization of North Korea. However, there is similarly little doubt that China prefers a nuclear North Korea over which it retains some meaningful degree of influence to one wracked by internal instability—or to no North Korea at all. China is unwilling to permit the collapse of the friendly buffer state occu-

pying the critical geography between China's territory and that of South Korea, where U.S. forces are stationed. Furthermore, Beijing almost surely wishes to retain a sort of veto power over if, when, and how Korea would be reunified. With this in mind, waiting for China to cooperate more fully with the sanctions regime seems likely to remain a pipe dream.

As sanctions have deepened their bite on North Korea, China has become Pyongyang's lifeline. In 2005, China provided 46 percent of North Korea's imports and absorbed 37 percent of its exports. In 2019, those figures were 96 and 67 percent, respectively (Observatory of Economic Complexity, undated). According to news reports, despite a continuing lockdown on the China–North Korea border as a result of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, China has resumed at least some of the “official smuggling” that North Korea has long relied on to supply its citizens with vital foodstuffs, fuel, and other products (Whong, 2021). Although Beijing long ago wearied of the antics of the Kim family, there are no indications that China is willing to allow, let alone promote, the regime's demise.

Tacitly accepting the enduring reality of a North Korean nuclear capability is the key for the United States and its allies to move forward with any effort to cope with that capability.⁴ As long as the United States entertains the fantasy that it can eliminate North Korea's nuclear capability without conflict or a dangerous regime collapse in Pyongyang, U.S. leaders cannot engage fully on the key policies that focus on that arsenal: building a stable deterrent relationship with North Korea and establishing a sustained, multilateral effort to reduce tensions on the Korean Peninsula.⁵

The Chinese Parallel

Some observers worry that North Korea, deemed a rogue and certainly a brutal state, cannot be deterred. This seems an odd claim to make when discussing the behavior of a country that has, for seven decades, been successfully deterred from reigniting the Korean War. That North Korean leaders engage in behaviors well outside the bounds of extant international norms does not mean that they are not capable of a rational calculus regarding their own survival. North Korea's nuclear weapons are intended as the ultimate guarantors of the regime's survival, not the triggering devices to bring on its destruction.

U.S. concerns over North Korea's deterrability have a historical precedent. In 1964, Mao Zedong's China tested its first nuclear weapon. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a society-wide convulsion unleashed by Mao in an effort to restore his place atop the Communist Party hierarchy, began two years later. It is not known how many people died in the paroxysms of violence—sources vary from hundreds of thousands to 20 million—or how many tens of millions were vilified and persecuted, but much of the nation was lost to chaos for years (Strauss and Southerl, 1994).^a Even those working on China's nuclear weapon program were not spared trauma: More than 4,000 staff members at the primary research center in Qinghai were persecuted, at least 40 died by suicide, and five were executed.

In other words, just as China was acquiring its first nuclear weapons, it was enveloped in a kind of madness unprecedented in modern history. If ever onlookers should have been concerned about the dangers of an irrational, impulsive, out-of-control actor with its finger on the nuclear trigger, it was China during the Cultural Revolution.

Prior to China's first atomic test, studies on the implications of a Chinese nuclear capability generally concluded that "Chinese policy is likely to continue to be cautious and rational, and to seek gains by exploiting those opportunities that represent acceptable levels of risk" (Blachly et al., 1962, p. v).

"Cautious and rational" were certainly not descriptors that many observers would have used regarding China during the Cultural Revolution. Yet it was during the height of this madness that China acquired a usable nuclear arsenal. China conducted ten nuclear tests from 1969 to 1971, during the peak of the revolution; it successfully tested thermonuclear weapons and missile delivery of nuclear warheads.

Although some in the U.S. government advocated a nuclear first strike to eliminate China's nuclear program, the United States ultimately responded not with panic, sanctions, or threats of war. Instead, it was precisely as China emerged as a nuclear power, and during the initial wind-down of the Cultural Revolution—during U.S. President Richard Nixon's first term—that Washington moved toward engagement with Beijing, a process that ended in the United States formally recognizing the People's Republic of China in December 1978.

The global dynamics of the 1970s Cold War and the current period are of course quite different, and North Korea is not China. But the behavior of Mao's China certainly was that of an unstable, irrational—even crazy—state to a degree that North Korea has never even approached. That China nonetheless proved a responsible owner of nuclear weapons should encourage those who have concerns about the world's ability to manage and deter Pyongyang.

^a It is usually thought that the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976.

Out of the Dead End: A Way Forward

The sanctions that began in 2006 and are intended to make North Korea denuclearize have left the world confronting a greater threat than the one that prevailed in the late 1990s. Rather than harboring nuclear aspirations, North Korea now has a nuclear arsenal. More of the same strategy seems almost certain to result in more of the same outcome. The United States' policy toward North Korea has left both countries in a potentially dangerous dead end.

So, what is to be done? There is an obvious middle ground between the Obama administration's policy of nothing for nothing and the Trump administration's all-or-nothing approach. This middle ground can be characterized as *something for something*.

As a U.S. negotiating strategy, a something-for-something approach would require that each side make a meaningful but reversible gesture in the other's direction, with the intention of pursuing further mutually agreeable bargains toward the ultimate goal of reducing the threat to the United States and stabilizing the Korean Peninsula.

As a first step, for example, the United States and its allies could agree to lift some of the sanctions elements that have proven most crippling to North Korea's economy—especially its agricultural sector—while maintaining those with more-direct effects on the country's nuclear weapon and missile programs.⁶ In exchange, North Korea might allow inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency to visit some of its key nuclear sites, such as uranium enrichment facilities. Neither step fully meets the other's current demands, but the point is that *those*

demands are never going to be met by the other side, so a new tactic is needed.

The reversibility of these moves is why they might be successful—and marks a sharp contrast with the existing U.S. demand that North Korea take irreversible steps toward dismantlement as a precondition for further talks. Should either party come to believe that the other is not living up to its side of the bargain, it can withdraw; Pyongyang can kick out the inspectors, or Washington can fire up the sanctions engine once again.⁷ In fact, the wording of a United Nations resolution relaxing sanctions could be designed so that they would automatically be reinstated after some set period unless the United Nations were to pass a second resolution.⁸

This kind of small, incremental, something-for-something deal not only would offer the prospect for progress toward a more peaceful Korean Peninsula

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but also represents the sort of step that would begin to build trust between parties whose relationship has long been poisoned by the deepest of misgivings. And—importantly—should it fail, it would leave the situation no worse than would the continued pursuit of Washington’s current approach.

It is important not to overstate the prospects for progress using this or any other approach to dealing with Kim’s regime. North Korea is an intransigent and mercurial negotiating partner, and the process might begin and end with the first step or even fail at its inception. However, should the initial deal hold, subsequent steps can at least be speculated. Exchanges aimed at improving the security of the North Korean arsenal or providing incentives that reduce the prospect of nuclear weapon materials or know-how proliferating outside the country might be possible. Agreements that curb the current slow-burning arms race between the two Koreas may be imagined. Once the United States and its allies renounce the idea that negotiations are intended to denuclearize North Korea, the world may find in Pyongyang a less bitterly hostile regime with which to deal.

Maintaining the fiction that North Korea can somehow, some way be stripped of its nuclear weapons without an immensely costly war has become dogma in Washington. After so many years of multiple presidents declaring Pyongyang’s possession of nuclear weapons an intolerable risk to U.S. security, accepting that a nuclear North Korea is just something that U.S. leaders are going to have to figure out how to tolerate would be one of the more uncomfortable and dramatic reversals seen in recent U.S. foreign policy. But it is difficult to see a way forward toward a more secure Korea and East Asia without that acceptance. It is almost impossible for sound policy to be founded on fabulist expectations or assumptions. Continuing to focus on the unachievable goal of convincing North Korea to surrender its nuclear weapons can only confuse and complicate the very real strategic challenge of managing a nuclear-armed North Korea. Only by approaching North Korea’s nuclear capabilities with clear eyes and realistic expectations can U.S. policy help ensure that Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions are not unduly destabilizing and that the peace—however occasionally uneasy—since the end of the Korean War continues into the future.

Notes

- ¹ The United States first imposed nuclear weapon–related sanctions after North Korea announced in October 2006 that it had successfully conducted its first nuclear test.
- ² This is not to say that the two countries will not learn from each other’s experience. The United States’ withdrawal from the multi-national nuclear deal with Iran—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—could, for example, prejudice North Korean thinking about the advisability of entering into any arrangement with the United States, given that Washington has demonstrated an ability to reverse its course with the change of an administration.
- ³ I thank Terence Roehrig of the U.S. Naval War College for the suggestion to look at least somewhat deeper into the case for and against the utility of sanctions.
- ⁴ There are, of course, reasons why decisionmakers are hanging onto the illusion of a denuclearized North Korea. Advocates of the non-proliferation regime worry that failing to convince Pyongyang to divest its arsenal will set a bad example for others, including Iran. U.S. allies South Korea and Japan are strong voices in favor of denuclearization, and many fear that one or both of them may themselves develop nuclear weapons if North Korea is accepted as a nuclear power. None of these reasons is trivial, but reasons for desiring an outcome are not the same as reasons to believe it achievable. Sooner or later, all parties will simply have to deal with the facts on the ground as they are versus how the par-

ties wish they were. I thank Terence Roehrig, whose comments helped crystallize my thinking on this matter.

- ⁵ There are concerns that, rather than employ nuclear weapons outright, North Korea would brandish them for coercive purposes—for example, to compel South Korean concessions on reunification or other issues. This is not a baseless concern, although the historical behavior of nuclear weapon states suggests that it may be somewhat overblown. More to the point, fantasies of North Korean denuclearization do nothing to reduce what risks there may be, and predicating Western strategy on an unrealistic premise leaves the United States and its allies less prepared to deal with those risks.
- ⁶ For example, United Nations Security Council Resolutions 2375 and 2397 imposed stringent limitations on North Korea’s ability to import petrochemicals and machinery. These restrictions, which have had a damaging effect on agricultural productivity (see Smith, 2020), could be temporarily relaxed.
- ⁷ Some might be concerned that, once sanctions are relaxed, it might be difficult to restart them, but North Korea’s failure to abide by the terms of even this first tentative step toward an agreement with the United States would seem to do as good a job as could be hoped for demonstrating Pyongyang’s truculence and justifying sanctions that are perhaps even more severe.
- ⁸ I thank RAND Corporation colleague Rafiq Dossani for this point.

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About This Perspective

Early indications are that the Joe Biden administration will continue with the same failed approach to dealing with North Korea's nuclear weapon program that previous administrations have pursued. In this paper, the author argues that, instead of persisting in a doomed quest to denuclearize North Korea, the United States and its allies should adopt a "something-for-something" strategy that gradually establishes a framework for managing Pyongyang's nuclear capability in a way that improves stability and the chance for peace in East Asia.

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