

TESTIMONY ON UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARDS NORTH KOREA  
PREPARED FOR THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS SUBCOMMITTEE ON EAST  
ASIA, THE PACIFIC AND INTERNATIONAL CYBER SECURITY POLICY  
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It is hard not to feel a sense of drift when thinking about US policy towards North Korea over the last decade or so. The current policy, at one point termed “strategic patience,” by the Obama Administration, has apparently been thought good enough, perhaps because of the other issues on the foreign policy agenda, and perhaps also because successive administrations have tried, with China and our allies, Japan and South Korea, to engage the North on numerous occasions to no avail.

From the American perspective, these overtures have failed because the North has not been serious about engagement. We perceive the DPRK as preferring instead to blame the United States and the Republic of Korea for their hostility, and embrace its imposed version of splendid isolation, while pursuing its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs and depending upon Beijing to do what is necessary to insure that their regime does not suffer economic or political collapse..

Threats may be characterized as the product of intentions and capabilities. Taking the second first, it is the North’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs, rather than its army, navy, air force and special operations forces, that demand the most attention. For whatever reason, the North Koreans decided to forgo the accumulation of plutonium and nuclear weapons for almost a decade after the 1994 Agreed Framework, but when that deal collapsed, they moved promptly to again accumulate plutonium and begin to enrich uranium to support nuclear weapons development. By the end of this decade, by any estimate, North Korea will have tens of nuclear weapons, some mated to ballistic missiles for delivery to targets in the region and intercontinentally. This will be a new situation that plausibly will impact the North’s intentions, which have never been particularly easy to read in the past.

One of the few things that observers of North Korea seem to agree upon is that the regime’s first goal is its own survival. This means that the government’s actions may predictably bring enormous hardship to its own people, sanctions may be imposed that bring most harm to the most vulnerable – the young and the old – and the regime will still not fear pressure to change course. The DPRK enjoys the peculiar stability of a totalitarian state. But no one can be certain about whether the coming acquisition of a true nuclear weapons capability – vice the possession of only a few “devices” – will make the North more likely to take risks, or more risk averse. At the same time, we can be fairly certain that the regime’s policies will continue to be driven by the strategic objective of eventual reunification of the Korean people under its authority, and include instrumental goals of undercutting the US-ROK and US-Japan alliances, while preserving its relationship with Beijing.

Our experience with North Korea over the last couple of decades reveals an approach to achieving these goals which poses risks for the US and its allies. The intermittent provocations to the South along the DMZ, on coastal islands and at sea could escalate into hostilities and full-scale conventional war. Intermittent missile and nuclear weapons tests remind the Japanese and the South Korean people that the North is developing weapons that their governments have forgone, making them dependent on America's "extended" deterrent. And reviewing that dependence will always be an option in Tokyo and Seoul.

Most directly threatening to the US will be the emerging reality that America's west coast cities will be targetable by North Korean nuclear armed ballistic missiles. Deterrence, and some defense, will mitigate that new reality, but the essential psychological nature of a deterrent begs the question of effectiveness when dealing with what some suspect may be a psychopathic leader.

Perhaps the most dangerous activity that the North has pursued over the last couple of decades has been the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology and ballistic missiles to other countries. Pakistan's Gari intermediate range ballistic missile is based on the North Korean No Dong missile, as is the Iranian Shah Hab III. And late in the Bush Administration, the Israelis alerted Washington to the North Korean construction of a plutonium production reactor in Syria – which Israel went on to flatten. The US' very reasonable concern about the possibility of a 9/11 nuclear attack is only heightened by this North Korean willingness to transfer nuclear capability to unstable governments willing to pay in hard currency.

So while there are very good reasons not to be passive in designing policy and strategy to deal with North Korea, the question remains of what might work to reduce this threat. Nine points follow which aim to define a policy and create a strategy to manage and eventually reduce the threat.

First, continued, visible security consultations and exercises with friends and allies in the region, Japan and the ROK most importantly, will serve to sustain deterrence of the North while reassuring allies of the US commitment to their security. This should be accomplished without undertaking unnecessary military or naval activity sure to provoke a North Korean response.

Second, we should continue to maintain a sanctions regime aimed at isolating and weakening North Korea, but not delude ourselves into thinking that sanctions alone will bring about the changes we seek in the North's behavior – not so long as China continues to moderate the impact of sanctions.

Third, we should not resist the urge to remind Beijing of its responsibility to use its influence with its clients in Pyongyang to avoid adventures and enter negotiations when the opportunity arises. But we should resist the temptation to subcontract the most urgent security issue in Northeast Asia to China, America's great power competitor in the Asia-Pacific region.

Fourth, we should avoid making the goals of any negotiations with the DPRK preconditions for entering those negotiations. At the same time, any US administration must be wary of entering protracted negotiations with North Korea where they may visibly continue to advance their nuclear or ballistic capability while negotiations are underway. That would include test detonations or launches, or adding to fissile material accumulations at known facilities. In other words, there should be no advantage to the North of stalling, of building while talking.

Fifth, we should not hold preconceived notions of the modality for negotiations. Six party talks may be dead – or not – but the essential participants will be the US and North Korea, whatever the formal structure may be. The critical elements will be a bilateral engagement with close consultations between the US and Japan, the ROK and China.

Sixth, the days of isolating nuclear negotiations from human rights issues and a broader political settlement are over. We should expect such a settlement to eventually include a peace treaty to formally end a sixty year state of war.

Seventh, notwithstanding point number four, above, we should insist that the outcome of negotiations include the eventual re-entry of the North into the Non-Proliferation Treaty regime – lest our negotiations legitimize their nuclear weapons program. It should be clear that would anticipate acceptance of a safeguards regime that provides sufficient transparency to confirm North Korea's status as a non-nuclear weapons state, and without any stockpile of fissile material or production capability to create one.

Eight, we should find an opportunity to unambiguously warn the North Koreans at the highest level that the transfer of sensitive nuclear technology to another state or non-national actor cannot and will not be tolerated by the United States: drawing a genuine red line.

Ninth, we should take prudent steps with our allies to prepare for the realization of our ultimate goal of a unified Korea, whether through the slow transformation of the North Korean state or its sudden collapse.

It is possible, of course, that negotiations on the terms envisioned here cannot be launched, and we will be left with one or another version of containment. This would not be ideal, but any sense of policy adrift should be banished by clarity about what national and international security requires in light of the challenges presented by North Korea to the United States and its allies.