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North Korea: August 2017 update

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Korean Peninsula



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Summary

Tensions have risen alarmingly in the Korean peninsula during the course of 2017. North Korea appears to be making faster progress towards having a nuclear weapons system that can reach the US than many observers expected.

The new US president Donald Trump has declared that the era of “strategic patience” that characterised the presidency of his predecessor, Barack Obama, is over. All options – including military action – are now, it is said, on the table. The issue is again near the top of the US’s foreign policy agenda. While some struggle to identify a coherent new strategy under President Trump, others argue that what has emerged is one of “maximum pressure and engagement” (with the latter for the future, once the right conditions have been created).

President Trump has called on China to do more to end North Korea’s nuclear programme but doubts remain as to how far it will be willing to go. Following two apparently successful tests of ICBMs by North Korea that can reach parts of the US in July, his rhetoric became increasingly colourful.

Meanwhile, South Korea and Japan watch on with mounting concern at the escalating tensions but do not necessarily see entirely eye-to-eye over how best to respond. Japan broadly supports Trump’s approach – a position reinforced at the end of August when North Korea fired a ballistic missile that flew over its northern island, Hokkaido. South Korea’s new president, Moon Jae-in, was elected in April promising to renew attempts at engagement with the North but equally does not want to fall out with the US.

Although the geo-political (and rhetorical) stakes have certainly risen, few experts give much credence to the efficacy of the military options available to the US and its allies. While North Korea could be defeated, it is difficult to see how they could be implemented without large-scale military and civilian losses in South Korea and Japan. China still fears regime collapse in the North above all else.

Views nonetheless differ markedly over the best (or least- worst) policy mix that should be pursued today. Few think sanctions so far have been effective. But there are big disagreements over why this might be. For some, they’ve barely been tried; for others, North Korea’s leadership are not bothered or likely to be heavily affected by them, no matter how severe they become.

A new, tougher, round of UN sanctions was agreed in August. The US has also started to impose unilateral sanctions against Chinese and Russian entities believed to be helping to fund North Korea’s nuclear programme.

It is unclear whether there is anything that might persuade North Korea’s leadership to abandon its nuclear ambitions, which it views as the best guarantor of the regime’s survival. It is clear in its own mind what the ‘lessons’ of Iraq and Libya were. Kim Jong un appears politically secure at the head of the regime.

For some, all this means accepting the previously unthinkable: North Korea will be a nuclear weapons state. For them, it is too late to stop this from happening and the only option is to acknowledge reality, freeze the further development of North Korea’s programme, try to stabilise the region on this basis and ultimately incorporate the North into nuclear disarmament efforts in future.

Others passionately disagree with such an analysis, arguing North Korea would use its new status to blackmail the US and the region in pursuit of reunification on its own terms.

In recent weeks, North Korea has threatened to carry out launch ballistic missiles designed to land in the Pacific Ocean near the US Pacific Ocean territory of Guam but has so far held off doing so. There has been some relaxation in tension but the respite may only be temporary.

The consensus is that a North Korean attack into the sea near Guam would not trigger Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, under which members are obliged to come to each other's defence if attacked. Nor would a North Korean attack on Guam itself. Article 5 applies only to North America, Europe and islands in the North Atlantic which are under the jurisdiction of member states.

1. The nuclear programme: recent developments

Overview

Despite having conducted a number of nuclear tests North Korea is not recognised by the international community as a nuclear weapons state. It is currently considered nuclear capable. But it may be close to crossing that threshold.

Until recently, most experts agreed that it had a small number of warheads (a common estimate is 8-10), and a short-to-medium range delivery capability capable of targeting locations in its immediate sphere of influence, including US forces in the Pacific. Achieving a viable long-range nuclear capability able to target the US mainland was agreed to be its objective, as was miniaturising its warheads so that they will fit on its ballistic missiles.

The regime has continued to test both its nuclear warheads and its ballistic missile capabilities in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions.¹

North Korea has conducted five nuclear weapon tests since 2006, with the most recent in September 2016. As tensions rose during early 2017, a sixth was widely expected. However, so far this year the regime has focused on testing its ballistic missiles. For example, in April 2017, it conducted three Intermediate-Range Ballistic Missiles (IRBMs).

July 2017: North Korea conducts two intercontinental missile tests

On 4 July 2017 (US independence day), the regime conducted an Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) test. Most observers viewed the test as successful, leading some to warn that its potential range meant that Hawaii and Alaska could now be within reach of North Korea.² This has raised questions about whether North Korea will be able credibly to target the US mainland in significantly less than the five year timeframe recently posited.

While cautioning that further investigation may lead to a changed assessment of what was only a single ICBM test, John Schilling, writing for the website '38 North', said:

We hadn't expected this to happen this soon. However, it will probably require another year or two of development before this missile can reliably and accurately hit high-value continental US targets, particularly if fired under wartime conditions. For now, it is a more uncertain threat. But an uncertain threat to the US mainland can still be a powerful deterrent, and it probably won't take years for us to see the diplomatic and political implications of that threat.

¹ For a more detailed discussion of its nuclear programme, see Library briefing paper 7566 (12 June 2017), [Nuclear Weapons - Country Comparisons](#)

² John Schilling, "[North Korea finally tests an ICBM](#)", 38 North, 5 July 2017

[...] We had thought that we would have until perhaps early 2020 to prepare for a North Korean ICBM capability, but it turns out they were working on a different timetable. That has serious strategic, diplomatic and political implications for the very near future. For instance, starting today, US military commanders cannot be 100 percent certain that a war on the Korean peninsula won't stretch at least as far as Hawaii or Alaska. Soon, US allies will wonder if this is going to affect US commitments to defense and stability in the region. And the US political leadership is going to have to figure out what to do about that.³

Then on 28 July, North Korea conducted a second ICBM test. This test was also widely seen as having been successful and this time calculations of its potential range extended to the US West Coast and the interior. However, some concluded that the test had only been partially successful because the missile's re-entry vehicle had "disintegrated prematurely".⁴

Michael Elleman, a missile expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, said:

A reasonable conclusion based on the video evidence is that the Hwasong-14's re-entry vehicle did not survive during its second test. If this assessment accurately reflects reality, North Korea's engineers have yet to master re-entry technologies and more work remains before [North Korean leader] Kim Jong Un has an ICBM capable of striking the American mainland.⁵

Nonetheless, the second ICBM test heightened anxiety that North Korea was much closer to having a deliverable nuclear weapon than had been thought.

Miniaturisation of the warhead achieved?

These anxieties were further amplified on 8 August by press reports that US officials had assessed that North Korea was now also able to produce a miniaturised warhead that can fit inside its missiles and had more nuclear bombs than previously thought. According to the *Washington Post*:

The analysis, completed last month by the Defense Intelligence Agency, comes on the heels of another intelligence assessment that sharply raises the official estimate for the total number of bombs in the communist country's atomic arsenal. The United States calculated last month that up to 60 nuclear weapons are now controlled by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Some independent experts think the number is much smaller.

The findings are likely to deepen concerns about an evolving North Korean military threat that appears to be advancing far more rapidly than many experts had predicted.⁶

³ John Schilling, "[North Korea finally tests an ICBM](#)", 38 North, 5 July 2017

⁴ "[Video Shows Possible Failure of North Korean ICBM Test](#)", *The Atlantic*, 1 August 2017

⁵ "[Video Shows Possible Failure of North Korean ICBM Test](#)", *The Atlantic*, 1 August 2017

⁶ "[North Korea now making missile-ready nuclear weapons, U.S. analysts say](#)", *Washington Post*, 8 August 2017

Late-August 2017: North Korean missile test overflies Japan

On 29 August, while the US and South Korea were conducting military exercises which they characterise as defensive in character, North Korea launched an intermediate-range ballistic missile that overflew Hokkaido, a northern island of Japan. On the following day, it announced that this was the “first step” of military operations in the Pacific. The UN Security Council unanimously condemned the missile test.⁷

Ongoing proliferation concerns

Meanwhile, there has also been renewed concern recently about North Korea’s role as a proliferator of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), following reports that it has been attempting to supply chemicals by ship to the Syrian government of President Bashar al-Assad.⁸

⁷ [“North Korea: ‘Japan missile was first step in Pacific operation’”](#), *BBC News Online*, 30 August 2017

⁸ [“Two North Korean shipments to Syria intercepted in six months, UN told”](#), *Guardian*, 22 August 2017

2. The US response

The Obama presidency: “strategic patience”

When former President Barack Obama handed over the White House to his successor, Donald Trump, he reportedly told Trump that North Korea would be the most important foreign policy challenge facing the US in 2017 and beyond.

Some have claimed that, if these reports are true, there was a mismatch between that statement and the level of energy and attention which the Obama Administration actually gave the issue during its eight years in office. Its policy towards North Korea was known as “Strategic Patience”. It was a period of gradually escalating sanctions as North Korea pushed forward with its nuclear programme. No meaningful negotiations with North Korea took place.

In 2016, South Korea agreed to the installation of the US’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile system on its territory, but before it could happen, the country was plunged into domestic political turmoil, slowing implementation of the decision and opening up the possibility that it would be cancelled (see section 4).

For some, the US lacked a credible strategy during Obama’s presidency, leaving the new Trump Administration to take up the issue with time close to running out.

Critics saw the sanctions imposed as weak and ineffective and charged that little real pressure had been put on China by the Obama Administration to change the behaviour of its troublesome neighbour.

Contrasts were also made between the sustained US diplomatic investment that had gone into creating the right conditions for negotiations with Iran about putting a halt to its nuclear programme and the alleged lack of effort on North Korea.

President Trump: a coherent strategy?

During his campaign, Donald Trump had indicated that he would be willing to meet personally with Kim Jong un if elected; he repeated this on several occasions after he took office. However, many of his tweets have involved statements clearly designed to persuade North Korea’s leaders that the US will not allow North Korea to achieve its objective of becoming a nuclear weapons state and is prepared to take whatever measures are necessary to ensure it does not happen.

The new administration launched a review of US policy towards North Korea soon after taking office. It took place as the pace of North Korea missile testing intensified during the first half of 2017. While it was clear that the Obama-era policy of “Strategic Patience” was over, it was less immediately obvious what a new policy might comprise. However, by April 2017, elements of it appeared to be emerging. Some summarised

it as “maximum pressure and engagement”, with the first hopefully creating the conditions for the second further down the line.⁹

In addition, US strategy on North Korea (as with his foreign policy more broadly) would be communicated in a very different manner by President Trump as compared with his predecessor. Whether this is part of the strategy – by creating a heightened level of uncertainty and anxiety on the North Korean side about how far the US is willing to go – or simply reflects the president’s personal style remains a matter of debate.¹⁰

Over recent months, ‘maximum pressure’ has come to mean leaning more heavily on China to bring its influence to bear over North Korea and a major ratcheting-up of sanctions against the regime, both through the UN Security Council but also through additional measures by the US Administration against Chinese and Russian entities believed to be assisting North Korea in getting around UN sanctions.¹¹

While there have been occasional references by senior US officials to the desirability of talks with North Korea in future, it has been made clear that North Korea must accept first that it will have to completely abandon its nuclear programme. Despite the arguments of some commentators that the US should amend this precondition, perhaps by accepting a ‘freeze’ of the programme as sufficient to allow talks to begin, the Administration has so far shown no sign of doing so. The official goal remains the total denuclearisation of the Korean peninsula.¹²

This has led some commentators to claim that, for all his strong rhetoric, President Trump’s strategy is not that different in practice to Barack Obama’s. According to on *Politico* website on 8 August:

President Donald Trump has vowed a “very severe” response to North Korea’s escalating development of missiles and nuclear weapons. But behind closed doors, the Trump administration is pursuing a strategy that’s not all that different from President Barack Obama’s approach.

Administration officials are saying privately that a preventive military attack is “not on the table,” said Bruce Klingner, a veteran intelligence agent who works as a senior research fellow for northeast Asia at the influential Heritage Foundation. Instead, he said, they’re pursuing a five-part strategy similar to what the Obama administration employed — one that includes increasing pressure on both North Korea and the other countries that facilitate Kim Jong Un’s weapons program.

Other elements include increasing military readiness and capabilities, building up U.S. missile-defense capabilities and expressing openness to diplomatic discussions with Pyongyang —

⁹ [“Trump’s strategy on North Korea: ‘Maximum pressure and engagement,’ officials say”](#), *Chicago Tribune*, 14 April 2017

¹⁰ [“Trump bluster divorced from any real North Korea strategy”](#), MSNBC, 8 August 2017

¹¹ [“Two North Korean shipments to Syria intercepted in six months. UN told”](#), *Guardian*, 22 August 2017

¹² Michael Haas, [“Denuclearization Is Dead. Now Let’s Bury It”](#), *The Diplomat*, 15 August 2017

but refusing to negotiate with North Korea until it accepts the premise it must give up its nuclear program.¹³

Defenders of the administration's approach respond that the key difference from the Obama era is that President Trump is serious: he is willing to push much harder and go much further than his predecessor, who seemed at times to be rather going through the motions. According to them, the rhetoric Trump uses – for example, speaking of unleashing “fire and fury like the world has never seen” on Pyongyang and, according to US Senator Lindsey Graham, insisting that the US is willing to go to war, even if this leads to mass casualties in the region – underscores this point.¹⁴

Other senior Administration officials, not least Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, have tended to use more measured words. But one (presumably) unintended consequence of the president's rhetoric is that any heightened uncertainty and anxiety is now not just restricted to North Korea. With the stakes so high, many people and politicians in other countries, including amongst US allies in East Asia, are beginning to feel it too. Underlying such concerns are continuing questions about whether a coherent US strategy really exists – and, even if it does, whether there is sufficient coherence within the administration itself to execute it.¹⁵

The threat to Guam and US-South Korea military exercises

President Trump's statements led North Korea to further up the ante, announcing in mid-August that it had formulated plans for conventional intermediate ballistic missile launches that would fly over Japan and land in the ocean only 30-40 kilometres off the US Pacific territory of Guam, which is 3,400 kilometres away from Pyongyang.¹⁶

However, North Korea also said that it would wait to see what the next steps of the US were before implementing the plan. This apparent restraint, which was welcomed by President Trump, was widely interpreted as a reference to the joint US-South Korean military exercises planned to take place from 21 August for ten days. While such exercises are a regular event and are characterised as defensive in nature, North Korea has always viewed them as highly provocative, involving preparations for invasion.¹⁷

The exercises (called 'Ulchi Freedom Guardian') began on time and drew predictable condemnation by Pyongyang. Although said to involve 17,500 US troops and 50,000 South Korean soldiers, there have been reports that the US has reduced the numbers of its personnel involved

¹³ [“Trump's North Korea strategy: A lot like Obama's”](#), *Politico*, 8 August 2017

¹⁴ [“Trump's North Korea strategy: A lot like Obama's”](#), *Politico*, 8 August 2017; [“Obama warned Trump on North Korea. But Trump's 'fire and fury' strategy wasn't what Obama aides expected”](#), *Washington Post*, 9 August 2017

¹⁵ [“Obama warned Trump on North Korea. But Trump's 'fire and fury' strategy wasn't what Obama aides expected”](#), *Washington Post*, 9 August 2017

¹⁶ [“North Korea plan to hit Guam waters with missiles to be ready within days”](#), *CNN*, 10 August 2017

¹⁷ [“N Korea leader 'briefed' on Guam plan but opts to wait”](#), *BBC News Online*, 15 August 2017

and the types of deployed military assets.¹⁸ This signal could help if North Korea is looking for reasons not to go ahead with a missile attack into the ocean near Guam. In recent days, President Trump been more conciliatory, saying that he sees indications that North Korea is “starting to respect” the US.¹⁹ However, the US strongly condemned the 29 August North Korean intermediate ballistic missile test that overflew Japan before landing in the Pacific Ocean, albeit a long way short of Guam.²⁰

The consensus is that a North Korean attack on Guam would not trigger Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty, under which members are obliged to come to each other’s defence if attacked. Article 5 applies only to North America, Europe and islands in the North Atlantic which are under the jurisdiction of member states. The UK was unable to invoke it in the case of the Argentinian invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982.²¹ This does not mean that NATO allies would not assist the US in the event of an outbreak of hostilities with North Korea. In the event of an act of pre-emptive North Korean aggression, some of them (including the UK) would likely want to respond positively to a US request for assistance.

¹⁸ [“Decoding the Korean Peninsula Missile Rhetoric”](#), International Crisis Group, 21 August 2017

¹⁹ [“Trump voices mild optimism about ties with North Korea”](#), *Reuters*, 23 August 2017

²⁰ [“North Korea: ‘Japan missile was first step in Pacific operation’”](#), *BBC News Online*, 30 August 2017

²¹ [“America cannot insist on military help from Nato”](#), *Times*, 10 August 2017

3. China's response

The fundamentals remain

China's policy on North Korea has long-standing foundations. First, there is the historic alliance between two fellow-Communist countries, which includes a 1961 mutual defence pledge in the event of attack (although some doubt whether this pledge remains in effect).²² Second, there is the geo-strategic value of North Korea as a buffer between it and the US, which has a strong military presence in South Korea. And third, there is fear of a regime collapse that would trigger massive flows of people into China, destabilising the regions along the border.

China does not want North Korea to become a nuclear weapons state, but hitherto this has been trumped by these wider considerations. In recent years, China has accepted the imposition of UN sanctions against North Korea but its heart has so far never really been in it. It has always fought shy of the kinds of sanctions that might alter the latter's cost-benefit calculation about acquiring nuclear weapons or threaten the survival of the regime.²³ The US may believe that China may yet change its mind if all the alternatives start to look worse.

But China's opposition to the installation of the US THAAD missile system in South Korea, which it worries threatens its own military capabilities, is cited as evidence that its wider geo-political interests matter more to it than ending the North's nuclear ambitions. A range of undeclared 'sanctions' against South Korean businesses in China have been interpreted as a sign of Beijing's displeasure.²⁴

Could China do more?

Both President Obama and President Trump have been convinced that China, as by far North Korea's largest trading partner, has the power to change the regime's behaviour if it really wants to. China's failure to do so has been viewed as proof that it cannot be relied upon.

Others are less sure that Kim Jong un is amenable to Chinese influence, pointing to the fact that Kim has never visited Beijing and was prepared to order in February 2017 the assassination in Malaysia of his estranged half-brother, Kim Jong nam, for who China had provided protection.²⁵

The Chinese leadership is undoubtedly exasperated by North Korea's intransigence, but it has been reluctant to place all of the blame on Kim Jong un. It considers that the US under President Trump should be

²² "[China's military pact with N. Korea looks shaky](#)", *Mail Online*, 3 May 2017. The US and South Korea signed a mutual defence pact in 1953, the year that the Korean War ended with an armistice. There has never been a formal peace treaty.

²³ "[Is China serious about banning North Korean coal?](#)", *The Diplomat*, 27 February 2017

²⁴ "[As missile row drags on, South Korea's Lotte still stymied in China](#)", *Reuters*, 16 June 2017

²⁵ "[Kim Jong Nam killing spawns intriguing conspiracy theories](#)", *Financial Times*, 1 March 2017

making more effort to revive negotiations with North Korea. Where Chinese public opinion stands is difficult to gauge precisely.²⁶

Recent actions and statements

As North Korean missile tests have proliferated during the course of 2017, China has supported tougher UN sanctions. An announcement in Spring 2017 that it would stop importing coal from the North was seen by some as indicating that China was getting serious about putting pressure on the regime.²⁷

The latest sanctions, approved by UN Security Resolution 2371 on 5 August, are expected to cut North Korea's annual exports by one-third.²⁸ But sceptics suspect that, as in the past, China will not necessarily implement the sanctions as thoroughly as it could and may have gone along with them mainly in the (so far unrequited) hope that they might put a break on unilateral US moves against Chinese banks and entities that provide support to the North Korean economy.²⁹

As tensions mount, the Chinese President, Xi Jinping, may be questioning the coherence of current US policy towards the Korean peninsula. Xi was feted by Trump as a man he could do business with when they met in the US in April 2017, but within a few months Trump was declaring that China had not done enough to rein in North Korea.³⁰

Official Chinese statements have remained temperate as the war of words between Trump and Kim Jong un has escalated. But some English-language state media outlets have been less diplomatic, criticising Trump's use of language and arguing that China should take North Korea's side in the event of a US attack aimed at regime change.³¹

China's diplomatic efforts in recent months have been based on de-escalating tension through implementation of a "double freeze" plan: the US stops major military exercises in South Korea in return for the North halting missile tests. But the US has shown no apparent interest in the proposal. Some think that South Korea might be more tempted by the idea but to date has not formally endorsed it.³²

²⁶ "[China's leaders and citizens are losing patience with North Korea](#)", *The Conversation* [blog], 11 April 2017

²⁷ Richard Nephew, "[Delaying tactics: new sanctions, still no strategy](#)", *38 North* [blog], 7 August 2017

²⁸ "[China imposes import bans on North Korean iron, coal and seafood](#)", *BBC*, 15 August 2017

²⁹ "[U.S. targets Chinese bank, company, two individuals over North Korea](#)", *Reuters*, 29 June 2017

³⁰ "[Trump hails 'tremendous' progress in talks with China's Xi](#)", *BBC News Online*, 7 April 2017; "[Trump says China tried but failed to help on North Korea](#)", *Reuters*, 20 June 2017

³¹ "[Chinese state-owned paper says China will intervene and stop America if it attacks North Korea first - and will only stay neutral if Kim attacks the States first](#)", *Mail Online*, 11 August 2017

³² "[North Korea Gets Specific With Its Guam Threat](#)", *Stratfor*, 10 August 2017

4. South Korea's response

Muted during the early months of 2017

As tensions rose on the Korean peninsula during the first four months of 2017, South Korea's voice appear to have been relatively muted by the fact that the country was navigating a major domestic political crisis that led to the impeachment of President Park Geun hye, who had adopted a policy of increased pressure on and reduced engagement with North Korea. However, this hiatus came to an end with the victory in May 2017 in a special presidential election of Moon Jae in.

Moon Jae in, a former human rights lawyer, campaigned on a platform of prioritising engagement with North Korea – a stance which appeared at first sight to put him somewhat at odds with emerging US policy under President Trump. Candidate Moon had also questioned the need for the introduction, which began under former president Park, of the THAAD system in South Korea. However, he never went so far as to question the importance to South Korea of its long-standing alliance with the US, which for significant parts of society remains sacrosanct.

President Moon seeks to shape events

With tensions ratcheting up further since May, the new South Korean president has sought to coordinate closely with an assertive US while exploring ways of encouraging dialogue with North Korea – if not immediately, then certainly in the not-too-distant future.

In his inauguration address, President Moon said: "If the conditions shape up, I will go to Pyongyang." This was interpreted as a call for a heads-of-state summit, echoing that between former North and South leaders Kim Jong il and Roh Moo hyun in 2007.³³ He also suspended the installation of the THAAD system until an environmental impact assessment is completed, so slowing down the pace of its introduction.

President Moon met President Trump in Washington, DC, in late-June 2017. It was an amicable meeting but not one that answered all doubts about the health of the US-South Korea alliance. Nonetheless, President Moon made it clear that he accepted that increased pressure on North Korea was justified in order to bring it back to the negotiating table. While there, he made the case for a two-phase plan to deal with the crisis: first, a 'freeze' of North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes; second, negotiations on denuclearisation. The Trump administration has not so far taken up the plan.³⁴

The testing of two ICBMs by North Korea in July 2017 created the conditions for a further converging of views, as the two countries sought to maintain a united front. President Moon strongly supported the strengthened UN sanctions introduced in early-August. Following North Korea's launch of an intermediate-range ballistic missile overflying

³³ Lee Byong-Chul, "[Challenges ahead for the US-South Korea alliance](#)", *38 North*, 13 June 2017. Moon Jae in was a close ally of former president Ro Moo hyun (2003-08).

³⁴ Frank Aum and S. Nathan Park, "[Moving from a Sunshine to Sunburn policy on North Korea](#)", *38 North*, 28 June 2017

Japan on 29 August, South Korea showed its displeasure by conducting air exercises near its border with North Korea.

However, there have remained significant differences in emphasis and tone between him and his US counterpart. Following up an initiative several months ago, he has continued to propose to the North meetings at senior official level to discuss military and humanitarian issues, as well as next year's Winter Olympics, which are taking place in South Korea. To date, North Korea's response has been cool, saying that these overtures "lack sincerity".³⁵

Bottom lines

China's approach to the crisis is not so far apart from that being proposed by South Korea, but standing in the way of closer cooperation is the THAAD system. Given the impact rejecting it definitively would have on its alliance with the US, South Korea is unlikely to do so. This leaves it with room only to make gestures of the kind it has already made to buy time and room for manoeuvre (see above) – but there is a limit to the number of those that can be contrived. Before too long, South Korea is likely to give the go ahead for completing its installation.

South Korea might also be willing in future to negotiate a suspension or modification of its joint military exercises with the US if conditions permit. In the 1990s exercises were suspended, contributing to the signing of the 1994 Agreed Framework, which led to several years of US talks with North Korea on nuclear and other issues. But the US would need to agree to such a move too and currently seems uninterested in doing so.³⁶

Many wonder whether, in practice, there are any circumstances beyond a pre-emptive attack by North Korea in which President Moon would give South Korea's consent to significant US military action? In mid-August Moon said that he would "prevent war at all cost". He added: "No one can make a decision on military action on the Korean peninsula without our agreement." Some interpreted this as meaning that the South Korean administration considers that it effectively has a 'veto' over US military action. Senior US generals expressed disagreement with such an interpretation.³⁷

Could the US-South Korea alliance fracture under pressure? It seems highly unlikely in the near term but it is not beyond the realms of possibility in future. But if it did happen, some analysts do not rule out South Korea deciding to resume its own nuclear weapons programme, which has been frozen since the 1970s, as part of creating a new basis for stability on the Korean peninsula based on deterrence.³⁸

³⁵ ["Decoding the Korean Peninsula Missile Rhetoric"](#), International Crisis Group, 21 August 2017

³⁶ Frank Aum and S. Nathan Park, ["Moving from a Sunshine to Sunburn policy on North Korea"](#), *38 North*, 28 June 2017

³⁷ ["South Korea president 'will prevent war at all cost'"](#), *The National*, 17 August 2017

³⁸ ["South Korea faces an uncomfortable reality: a nuclear neighbour"](#), *New York Times*, 21 August 2017

5. Other responses

Japan

Japan's stance is closer to that of the US than South Korea's. During 2017, it has had to watch North Korea fire a series of ballistic missiles into the ocean off Japan, although none have yet landed within its territorial waters. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has declared the missile tests intolerable and has strongly supported strengthening sanctions against Pyongyang. However, it too has kept the option of a resumption of talks (along with all other options) 'on the table'.

Some argued that, if North Korea were to launch its threatened missile attack on Guam, Japan's position would undoubtedly harden further. Such missiles would be likely to fly over Japan to reach the Pacific Ocean.

On 29 August, North Korea launched an intermediate-range missile test that did fly over Japan's northern island of Hokkaido, landing in the Pacific Ocean. Japan described it as an intolerable provocation but did not, as the Japanese defence minister had said it might, deploy its anti-missile systems against the attack.³⁹

Could it do so if there are further such missile launches over Japan, as North Korea has suggested there may be? The US think-tank *Stratfor* has said: "The potential for an accident, particularly given the uneven track record of North Korean missiles, is fairly high."⁴⁰

As with South Korea, there are analysts who do not entirely rule out the possibility of Japan deciding in future that it needs its own nuclear weapons. Japan is believed to be capable of moving swiftly to that position if it opts to do so.

Russia

Russia's position has been close to that taken by China. Moscow joined Beijing in voting for the latest round of tough UN sanctions at the Security Council in early August.

However, *Stratfor* has argued:

Russia has played a bit of spoiler role of late in North Korea by selling fuel, hiring North Korean labour and buying up North Korean fishing rights to ease the impact of sanctions.

It concludes that "it is unclear whether Moscow has much positive leverage to exert on Pyongyang."⁴¹

UK

As did its predecessors, the new UK government has closely aligned its stance with that of the US – although it has used more conventional

³⁹ "[North Korea Gets Specific With Its Guam Threat](#)", *Stratfor*, 10 August 2017

⁴⁰ "[North Korea Gets Specific With Its Guam Threat](#)", *Stratfor*, 10 August 2017

⁴¹ "[North Korea Gets Specific With Its Guam Threat](#)", *Stratfor*, 10 August 2017

diplomatic language in its statements about the issue than President Trump has sometimes done.⁴²

FCO Minister Lord Ahmad welcomed the new UN sanctions agreed on 5 August:

The UK and our international partners are united in opposing and standing firm against the threat posed by North Korea. This resolution will cut the resources that North Korea is abusing to fund its reckless and illegal pursuit of nuclear and ballistic missile programmes.

North Korea has chosen this extremely dangerous and destabilising path. The regime is prioritising the pursuit of these weapons over and above its people, peace and stability in the region. The North Korean regime needs to change its course immediately and the UK calls on all countries to implement these new measures fully and robustly.⁴³

In August 2017, Malcolm Chalmers from the Royal United Services Institute called on the UK government to pay greater attention to North Korea, saying that renewed war “is now a real possibility.”

He writes:

What we do know is that, if war did begin, the president would be on the phone to 10 Downing Street within an hour asking for support [...] Whitehall needs to be preparing now for a range of possible scenarios that could unfold in the coming months”⁴⁴

He argues that the US would most likely ask for “RAF and special forces capabilities.”

He assesses that, if the US is widely seen to have initiated the hostilities, the UK government could struggle to gain parliamentary approval for sending forces to the Korean peninsula.⁴⁵

The UK has added its voice to the condemnation of North Korea’s 29 August ballistic missile test that overflowed Japan.

EU

The EU has been equally as forthright as the US in condemning North Korea’s missile tests during 2017 and has been strongly supportive of moves to toughen UN sanctions. However, it has tended to highlight the need to find a way of resuming talks with North Korea more consistently and has supported South Korea’s calls for dialogue.⁴⁶

⁴² “[Foreign Office Minister welcomes tougher sanctions on North Korea](#)”, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, press release, 5 August 2017; “[In a world where North Korean missile tests seem routine, let me be clear: this is not business as usual](#)”, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, speech, 5 August 2017

⁴³ “[Foreign Office Minister welcomes tougher sanctions on North Korea](#)”, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, press release, 5 August 2017;

⁴⁴ Malcolm Chalmers, “[Why the UK Needs to be Thinking Now about a Possible Korean War](#)”, *RUSI Newsbrief*, August 2017

⁴⁵ Malcolm Chalmers, “[Why the UK Needs to be Thinking Now about a Possible Korean War](#)”, *RUSI Newsbrief*, August 2017

⁴⁶ “[EU strongly condemns North Korean missile launches; supports South Korean dialogue initiative](#)”, External Action press release, 18 July 2017

In her most recent statement on North Korea, EU Foreign Policy High Representative Federica Mogherini began by saying that there is “an urgent need for a de-escalation of tensions”.⁴⁷

In mid-August, German Chancellor Angela Merkel expressed concern about some of President Trump’s rhetoric.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ [“Statement by HR/VP Federica Mogherini on the situation on the Korean Peninsula”](#), External Action press release”, 14 August 2017

⁴⁸ [“She can speak for Germany’ Furious Trump hits back at Merkel as she warns USA on Korea”](#), *Express*, 14 August 2017

The scope and impact of sanctions

Scope

Seven rounds of UN sanctions have been agreed by the Security Council since North Korea's first nuclear test in 2006. While each time the regime has been strengthened, in order to avoid a veto by China and Russia, they have focused fairly narrowly on hindering the development of North Korea's nuclear programme. The sanctions have come to include asset freezes and travel bans against named individuals and entities within North Korea believed to be involved in supporting the programme.

The EU, US and Japan have also tightened their national sanctions regimes against North Korea over the last decade.

Following North Korea's fourth nuclear weapons test in January 2016, UN sanctions were expanded to include a partial ban on some mineral exports (eg coal and iron) to North Korea and a complete ban on others (eg gold and rare earth minerals). It was also made mandatory for member states to inspect cargo leaving or entering North Korea by land, sea or air. This was aimed not just at North Korea's nuclear programme but also at the risk it is believed to pose in terms of WMD proliferation.⁴⁹

The series of ballistic missile tests carried out by North Korea during 2017, culminating in two ICBM tests in July, have led to a further strengthening of the UN sanctions regime. The UN sanctions agreed unanimously by the Security Council in early August included:

- A full ban on North Korean exports of coal, iron, lead and seafood products that is expected to cut the value of its exports by one-third (on current estimates, this will reduce revenue from \$3 billion to \$2 billion a year).
- A ban on countries from giving new work permits to North Korean labourers; this has been another important source of revenue for the regime).
- The addition of nine individuals and four entities (including North Korea's primary foreign exchange bank) to the UN's 'blacklist', thereby subjecting them to a global asset freeze and travel ban.

But a US-led call for cuts in oil deliveries to North Korea did not ultimately feature as part of these new measures due to Chinese and Russian opposition.⁵⁰

EU sanctions have more-or-less tracked the UN's regime as it has strengthened. The US and Japan have gone beyond the UN's regime with additional measures to cut off flows of revenue to North Korea. The new US Administration of President Donald Trump said that it

⁴⁹ ["Two North Korean shipments to Syria intercepted in six months. UN told"](#), *Guardian*, 22 August 2017

⁵⁰ ["United Nations Security Council unanimously approves sanctions on North Korea to ban \\$1bn of exports"](#), *Daily Telegraph*, 5 August 2017

would begin targeting Chinese individuals and entities which have played a role in funding North Korea's nuclear programme and has begun to do so. In June, the Treasury Department announced sanctions against the Bank of Dandong, a Chinese entity based in a city near the border with North Korea, cutting off its access to US financial markets, as well as against a Chinese shipping company and two named individuals.⁵¹ Losing access to US financial markets is particularly damaging to such banks because so much international banking is conducted in dollars. In late-July, the US Congress also passed new sanctions measures against North Korea, which were signed into law by President Trump.⁵²

China protested, but if it hoped that its agreement to new UN sanctions in early-August might protect it from further US measures, it was to be disappointed. On 22 August, the Treasury Department announced sanctions against a further nine Chinese and a Russian company, as well as six named individuals from both countries. Both governments condemned the move. Major Chinese parastatals have not yet been affected by the US sanctions. If this happened, Chinese opposition to US sanctions could intensify further.⁵³

In recent months, Japan has also begun for the first time to target companies and named individuals not directly linked to the North Korean nuclear programme.⁵⁴

South Korea has also engaged in its own 'sanctions-like' measures. For example, since 2016 the Kaesong Industrial Complex, the last remaining inter-Korean joint venture, at which over 50,000 North Korean workers were employed by South Korean companies, has been closed.

Impact

Many experts have agreed that, at least until recently, UN sanctions have done little damage to the North Korean regime – or modified its behaviour. Indeed, one observer has described them as “punishing a masochist”.⁵⁵

But some have argued that any ineffectiveness has been mainly down to a lack of international will and commitment – what is needed is smarter, more determined implementation. The finger of blame for this lack of will and commitment has often been pointed at China, which is estimated to control 85-90% of North Korea's foreign trade and which provides it with assistance, including shipments of subsidised fuel.

It has also been asserted that sanctions have not yet been applied against North Korea in a way comparable to those introduced against Iran between 2006 and 2013, which eventually brought the latter to the

⁵¹ [“U.S. targets Chinese bank, company, two individuals over North Korea”](#), *Reuters*, 29 June 2017

⁵² [“Russia sanctions: Trump's hand forced by Senate vote”](#), *BBC News Online*, 28 July 2017

⁵³ [“US hits Chinese and Russian companies, individuals with sanctions for doing business with North Korea”](#), *Washington Post*, 22 August 2017

⁵⁴ [“Russia sanctions: Trump's hand forced by Senate vote”](#), *BBC News Online*, 28 July 2017

⁵⁵ [“Carrots or sticks to take on North Korea?”](#), *BBC News Online*, 24 February 2016

negotiating table.⁵⁶ However, one analyst, Joshua Stanton, claimed last year that, cumulatively, sanctions are beginning to ratchet up the diplomatic and financial pressure on North Korea.⁵⁷ China's announcement in Spring 2017 that it would stop importing coal from the North has been seen by some as indicating that it is getting serious about putting pressure on the regime.⁵⁸

Earlier this year, a US-based thinktank, C4ADS, published a report on the system through which North Korea is financing its nuclear programme. The report has been influential in encouraging those who believe that international sanctions can make a difference after all. It argued that

[...] this system is centralized, limited, and vulnerable, and that its disruption should greatly increase the pressure on the Kim regime to return to the negotiating table.⁵⁹

Below is the Executive Summary of the report:

North Korea employs a global array of overseas networks to circumvent international sanctions and continue its pursuit of nuclear weapons. These networks are engaged in schemes as diverse as cybercrime, military equipment sales, currency counterfeiting, narcotics, and even wildlife trafficking. They make up a complex overseas financing and procurement system designed to raise the funds and materials North Korea needs for its regime security and weapons programs. As sanctions have tightened, these networks have grown increasingly important to the regime. Moreover, they illustrate how North Korean officials have gained a deep understanding of international trade, finance, and transportation and how to nest their illicit activities within them.

In this report, we conduct a system-level examination of the North Korean overseas financing and procurement system. Our paper finds that this system is centralized, limited, and vulnerable, and that its disruption should greatly increase the pressure on the Kim regime to return to the negotiating table.

In *Centralized*, we examine key individuals and companies that connect networks from around the world. We discuss case studies of both regime "tactical controllers," who conduct the operational tasks needed to move illicit goods, as well as "strategic chokepoints" through which these goods and their regime financing must flow.

In *Limited*, we explore trends within China-North Korea trade, the largest market exploited by North Korean overseas networks. Our data shows only 5,233 Chinese companies to have traded with North Korea from 2013 to 2016. Our analysis shows a small number of interconnected firms annually account for vast proportions of the trade, limiting the number of avenues in which North Korea can nest its illicit activity.

⁵⁶ Richard Nephew, "[Sanctions in search of a strategy](#)", *38 North* [blog], 21 June 2017

⁵⁷ "[Andrei Lankov doesn't really know if North Korea sanctions are working](#)", *freekorea.us*, 19 July 2016

⁵⁸ Richard Nephew, "[Delaying tactics: new sanctions, still no strategy](#)", *38 North* [blog], 7 August 2017

⁵⁹ "[Risky business: a system-level analysis of the North Korean proliferation financing system](#)", C4ADS, 2017

In *Vulnerable*, we analyze corporate structures and risk indicators that can be used to filter this data to identify potential dual-use transactions and networks of possible concern. Our priority lay in linking previously unidentified entities with known North Korean illicit actors to showcase the possibility of causing systemic disruption using targeted enforcement.

There is a need for immediate action. The North Korean regime is unpredictable and dangerous. Pyongyang is willing to sell conventional weapons to war torn countries around the world, employ chemical weapons to murder potential rivals, push for further development of nuclear weapons, proliferate nuclear technology to the Syrian regime, engage in cyber terrorism, and threaten both Washington, DC and Seoul with destruction. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi recently characterized the atmosphere in the region as, “with swords drawn and bows bent,” (剑拔弩张). Devising effective strategies to disrupt and dismantle North Korean overseas networks that provide critical support to its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and ballistic missile programs requires identification of key personnel and an understanding of organization, operations and methods of evading and adapting to sanctions. We intend for this report to be a first step in that direction.⁶⁰

A July 2017 article by Bill Powell in *Newsweek* said that analysts in the CIA and the Treasury Department have been arguing along these lines for years:

They note that sanctions in 2005 against a single Macau-based bank—Banco Delta Asia—infuriated Pyongyang because BDA was a linchpin in the laundering of North Korean funds. It was also thought to house some of the money of senior government officials. More than \$25 million in funds were frozen, and every international bank that did business with BDA lost access to the U.S. financial system. The BDA sanctions were “the most effective targeted effort we’ve had,” says former Treasury official Stuart Levey. Two years later, Pyongyang demanded that the BDA sanctions be removed as the price of returning to the nuclear negotiating table in the so-called six party talks—also involving China, Russia, Japan and South Korea. The Bush administration relented. The talks went nowhere.⁶¹

If the new US Administration is reverting to this kind of approach – and scaling it up – international sanctions against North Korea could be entering a new phase. But some believe that, unless increased pressure of this kind is “paired with a credible negotiating effort”, the measures could be “counterproductive”. Richard Nephew claims that the new UN sanctions are still not part of a coherent strategy with clear objectives.⁶² There have also been warnings that more effective international sanctions could impel North Korea to try and generate additional revenue through illegal sales of WMD-related items.

⁶⁰ [“Risky business: a system-level analysis of the North Korean proliferation financing system”](#), C4ADS, 2017

⁶¹ Bill Powell, [“Will Trump stop the 10 Chinese companies supplying North Korea’s nuclear program?”](#), *Newsweek*, 13 July 2017

⁶² Richard Nephew, [“Delaying tactics: new sanctions, still no strategy”](#), *38 North* [blog], 7 August 2017

6. Domestic developments

It is important to remind ourselves of North Korea expert Andrei Lankov's dictum about what is happening inside North Korea – that “most of the time we are entirely ignorant, and a very large part of what is reported in the media is based on unreliable hearsay.”⁶³

This said, the majority view amongst North Korea experts remains that Kim Jong un is politically secure at the head of the regime for now. According to Lankov, he has achieved this by addressing three major threats since he came to power in 2011:

- *Foreign attack* – the nuclear programme is a defensive response to the threat of regime change and it entrenches his power and authority;
- *Elite discontent* – he has carried out dramatic purges and executions (plus, in the case of Kim Jong nam, an assassination). Kim particularly fears a domestic military coup;
- *Popular uprising* – the main cause of this would be a stagnant economy. Kim's father held back from Chinese-style economic reform because he feared that it would “provoke an East German-style political collapse”. But his son has gone much further down the economic reform path.⁶⁴

In the economic sphere, Lankov argues that he has introduced “incremental policies that look remarkably like what China did in the 1980s.” Both agriculture and industry have been largely freed from state control; private entrepreneurs have been allowed to operate without onerous restrictions. The result, claims Lankov, has been an “economic revival” of sorts, which Kim Jong un hopes, combined with “harsh surveillance will keep his population docile.” However, Lankov believes that, as people become more aware of what life is like in South Korea and beyond, there is a real chance of change from below, noting: “The Kim family might be rational, but so are the North Koreans themselves.”⁶⁵

Some analysts are more sceptical than Lankov about the depth of Kim Jong un's economic reforms and the extent to which they are raising living standards for ordinary North Koreans. For them, any ‘marketisation processes’ under way have arisen by default as much as by design and that North Korea has ended up

[...] witnessing the worst of both state and market failures, resulting in increasing inequality in social provision and in the

⁶³ “[Ignorant Experts–Andrei Lankov on Watching North Korea](#)”, *The 3 Wise Monkeys* [website], 19 November 2012. We cite this in every briefing we publish about North Korea.

⁶⁴ Andrei Lankov, “[Kim Jong un is a survivor, not a madman](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 26 April 2017

⁶⁵ Andrei Lankov, “[Kim Jong un is a survivor, not a madman](#)”, *Foreign Policy*, 26 April 2017

social structure itself, where the nouveau riche with party links appear to be in the ascendant.⁶⁶

Assessing the possible impact of international sanctions on the North Korean economy over the coming period, Georgy Toloraya argues that this is still in the balance. They could harm the access of market actors to foreign currency and damage domestic investment or the regime may further liberalise the economy even if only to improve its chances of survival.⁶⁷

There was an expectation in some quarters that the 7th Congress of the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) in May 2016 – the first such Congress for 36 years – might be the moment when Kim Jong un announced major policy changes in the economic and (less likely) political spheres. But he did not do so. Overall, the dominant motifs from the Congress appear to have been stability and 'business as usual'.

The main announcement at the Congress was the anointing of Kim Jong un as chairman of the KWP, apparently confirming his one-man rule. Some view this move as consistent with a shift in power within the regime towards the party and away from the army. Others believe that the two cannot meaningfully be distinguished from each other in North Korea. According to Ruediger Frank, the Kim family matters much more than any particular institution.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Stephen Haggard, "[Hazel Smith's North Korea: markets and military rule](#)", *Peterson Institute for International Economics*, 10 June 2016

⁶⁷ Georgy Toloraya, "[Deciphering North Korean economic policy intentions](#)", *38 North* [blog], 26 July 2016

⁶⁸ Ruediger Frank, "[The 7th Party Congress in North Korea: a return to a new normal](#)", *38 North* [blog], 20 May 2016

7. Looking ahead

East Asia has been compared by some commentators with Europe in 1914, with North Korea viewed as the most likely potential trigger for an outbreak of major armed conflict. Developments during 2017 appear to bear out this assessment.

It is, of course, impossible to predict what will happen next. But some analysts have tried to identify possible scenarios. In early-August, Julian Borger in the *Guardian* came up with these seven “potential scenarios”:

Preventative war

The “fire and fury” option. In recent days the US national security adviser, HR McMaster, raised the prospect of “preventative war” as a policy option. The idea would be to administer a sudden hammer blow to North Korean (DPRK) military infrastructure that would substantially set back its ability to attack the US and could trigger a coup or a revolt. The downsides to this option are foreboding. The regime has missiles hidden all over the country, as well as 8,000 big guns trained largely at Seoul, 40 miles across the demilitarised zone. No first strike would come close to disarming Kim Jong-un completely and his retaliation would almost certainly involve mass civilian deaths.

Forceful containment

There is a theory that the US and its allies have been too soft, letting DPRK military provocations go unpunished. A forceful containment would involve the “proportionate” use of force to send punitive messages but below the all-out level of a preventative first strike. So the next intercontinental ballistic missile or nuclear test would be met with the bombing of test sites. The biggest problem with this is there is no guarantee Pyongyang would make the distinction between limited blows and all-out war and it is hard to see how, once started, escalation could be stopped, leading to all the appalling dangers of the war option.

Decapitation

Trying to kill the North Korean leadership is part of the joint US-South Korean war plan and the South Koreans reportedly have a special brigade trained to do just that. But there are a thousand ways it could go wrong. Kim is one of the best guarded targets in the world, and there is no guarantee that someone just as bad or worse would not take his place. Plus it could trigger an all-out war.

Increased economic pressure

North Korea is already the most economically isolated country on earth, especially after the latest UN sanctions, imposed over the weekend. Turning the screw further would require better Chinese enforcement, but Beijing fears triggering the collapse of the DPRK regime. Some US commentators have called for sanctions against Chinese companies breaking the existing embargo, but that could trigger tit-for-tat measures by Beijing and divide the US and China at a critical moment. Furthermore, it is far from clear that it would bring about a change in behaviour from a regime steeped in smuggling and the ideology of self-reliance.

Return to formal negotiations

The DPRK regime shows no appetite to return to the six-party talks that petered out under the Obama administration. The US has said it will talk but only on condition that Pyongyang suspends missile testing and accepts that negotiations are aimed at the ultimate elimination of its nuclear weapons programme, conditions the DPRK has not been ready to accept. Formally accepting the rogue nation as a weapon state would have implications for non-proliferation around the world, and could provide an incentive for others to follow Pyongyang's example.

Freeze for freeze

China and Russia have backed a proposal by which Pyongyang would stop missile and nuclear tests while the US, South Korea and their allies would stop military exercises. One objection to this approach has been that it assumes an equivalence between South Korea's defensive precautions, and the DPRK's defiance of the rest of the world by detonating nuclear bombs. It is not yet clear whether the new South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, is more favourable to the proposal than his predecessor, and no guarantee that Pyongyang would abide by it.

Exploratory talks

Siegfried Hecker, a leading US expert on the DPRK who has visited the country seven times and toured its nuclear facilities has urged US and North Korean officials to meet immediately, and without conditions, to open a channel of communication as a hedge against miscalculation in which a small incident could spiral out of control.⁶⁹

Borger does not rank these scenarios according to their likelihood. However, Stein Tønneson from the Norwegian Peace Research Institute Oslo, does so when coming up with three possible scenarios:

I see three scenarios for how the Korean crisis can develop in the next year: War, permanent crisis or a negotiated deal. The first is least likely, the second very likely, and the third more likely than war.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ "[North Korea-US tensions: seven potential scenarios](#)", *Guardian*, 9 August 2017

⁷⁰ "[Why a war with North Korea is unlikely](#)", *Aljazeera*, 12 August 2017

8. Further reading

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