For decades, both North Korea and the United States have in their own way thwarted efforts to resolve the threat of a nuclearized North Korea. Both have cheated on, or failed to fulfill, past agreements to bring a halt to Pyongyang’s nuclear program. Under Kim Jong Un, North Korea has achieved a level of nuclear and missile development that has finally caught the eye of Washington and the American public. Is peace still possible?

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Regime Change: Desirable but Not Feasible in the Near Term

By Bruce Klingner

For outsiders struggling with how to respond to Pyongyang’s continued and escalating provocations, the idea of removing Kim Jong Un from power has the allure of simplicity and speed. Take out the top, and all that flows from it will go away.

But, as Bruce Klingner argues, the options for regime change in North Korea are both risky and far from simple.

The North Korean regime is a direct threat to its citizens and neighboring countries. Human rights and humanitarian advocates argue over whether to improve the plight of the country’s oppressed masses through “name and shame” confrontational tactics or by providing unconditional assistance to alleviate the suffering of its people.

As the recent sixth nuclear test and the latest ballistic-missile firings underscore, the regime has made developmental breakthroughs in its nuclear and missile programs over the past two years, adding substantially to the threat faced by the US and its allies. Security experts disagree over how to counter North Korea’s inexcusable march toward nuclear-tipped missiles — through diplomatic engagement, heightened pressure on the regime and its foreign facilitators or preventive military attacks.

All of these options seem unsatisfactory because, in turn, they have been repeatedly tried and failed, require long-term international resolve and dedicated sanctions enforcement or are likely to lead to war on the Korean Peninsula.

Policy fatigue, exasperation and the growing fear of Pyongyang’s ability to threaten the continental US with nuclear weapons have triggered a dialogue on whether the ultimate solution to the myriad problems with North Korea is through regime change.

Removing the Kim Jong Un regime may be the only way to eliminate the North Korean security threat to the US and its allies as well as end the regime’s ongoing crimes against humanity involving its own citizens. With every day that the regime remains in power, the region seems to slip inexorably toward conflict, while North Koreans themselves are repressed, tortured and killed.

Is the Trump Administration Pushing Regime Change?

Debate over removing Kim Jong Un was accentuated by perceptions that CIA Director Mike Pompeo signaled that the administration of US President Donald Trump was considering it as a policy option. During an interview conducted at the Aspen Security Forum, Pompeo said:

“...it would be a great thing to denuclearize the peninsula... but the thing that is most dangerous about it is the character who holds the control over them today. So from the administration’s perspective, the most important thing we can do is separate those two. Separate capacity and someone who might well have intent and break those two apart...”

Pompeo added that both the intelligence community and the Department of Defense were tasked with drafting plans for what “ultimately needs to be achieved” with regard to the North Korean nuclear threat. However, during the question and answer portion of the event, Pompeo clarified that he did not view Kim’s ouster as an immediate task and sought to downplay speculation that he was signaling administration policy.

North Korea responded harshly to Pompeo’s comments, threatening to strike a “merciless blow at the heart of the US with our powerful nuclear hammer, honed and hardened over time,” if it detected “even the slightest sign of attempt to remove our supreme leadership.”

Pompeo’s comments were subsequently downplayed by statements from other senior administration officials. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson tried to dismiss speculation that Washington sought regime change, saying “We are not your enemy. We do not seek a regime change, we do not seek the collapse of the regime, we do not seek an accelerated reunification of the peninsula, we do not seek an excuse to send our military north of the 38th parallel.”

In an op-ed in The Wall Street Journal, Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis proclaimed, “The US has no interest in regime change or accelerated reunification of Korea. We do not seek an excuse to garrison US troops north of the Demilitarized Zone.”

Defining Regime Change

“Regime change” is also a loaded term, since it can cover a range of military scenarios as well as less provocative options. Regime change would be the removal of the current Kim regime rather than a changed regime with Kim Jong Un remaining in power while altering his government’s policies.

It could be debated whether removing only Kim would constitute regime change, or if it would also require eliminating the entire system. Since its creation after the end of the Second World War, North Korea has been led by three successive members of the Kim family. As such, the nation is a personification of l’etat c’est moi.

Many experts had predicted that North Korea would collapse after the death of its founder Kim Il Sung in 1994 and then the death of his son Kim Jong Il in 2011. But the regime weathered both dynastic succession crises, one occurring during a great famine, without apparent challenges from potential contenders.

What follows is a discussion of a range of potential regime change policies.

Regime change through military action. This is probably the option that comes to mind most readily when discussing regime change. Leadership decapitation could be achieved with assassination by special forces units — perhaps this is why Pyongyang objected to the presence of SEAL Team Six during military exercises in South Korea — a limited military strike such as by an F-117 stealth aircraft with precision munitions or a broader military campaign.

All of these options may be inconsistent with the jus ad bellum, or just war doctrine, and with American principles against attacks on foreign leaders outside of war. Executive Order 12333 explicitly proscribes assassination: “No person employed by or acting on behalf of the United States Government shall engage in, or conspire to engage in, assassination.”

Removing Kim Jong Un may be possible through a precision strike but would require perfect, real-time intelligence on his location as well as US military assets being able to penetrate highly restrictive North Korean territory.

Regime change to remove the ICBM threat. A US preventive attack to stop North Korea achieving full ICBM capability might occur in isolation, targeting only the ability to strike the US rather than the North Korean leadership itself, or in conjunction with the objective of removing the regime.

Even if a military strike to eliminate ICBM targets did not begin with the intention of regime change, it could evolve into that if a strong North Korean response led to large US and South Korean casualties.

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5. French King Louis XVI’s boast, “I am the state.”
The attack on Pearl Harbor caused 2,403 deaths, to which the US responded with a massive war effort to eliminate the Japanese leadership. Would even larger casualties from a North Korean response not lead the US public to clamor for removing the regime and finally winning the Korean War?

Defense Secretary Mattis commented that outright war with North Korea would be “catastrophic” and “probably the worst kind of fighting in most people’s lifetimes.” It could also create an insurgency that exceeds the US experience in Iraq and Afghanistan.

**Regime change by internal elements.** In this scenario, internal dissident groups would end the Kim regime. But, to date, there appears to be no organized resistance to Kim Jong Un. While a North Korean-led assassination or coup is always a possibility, the regime’s security services have pervasive control over the population, government and military.

There is no viable member of the current regime who can be remotely identified as reformist — indeed, any suggestion of reform by an official has led to his removal. Nor are there any obvious dissident leaders, either in-country or in exile, around whom a resistance movement could rally. There are no North Korean Nelson Mandelas or Aung San Suu Kys. Dissidents in other countries have coalesced around entities such as trade unions, churches and student groups which, though operating under strict controls, were able to disseminate counter-regime messages and organize.

Even the most brutal Eastern European or Middle Eastern regimes pale in comparison with North Korea. Do not expect an “Arab Spring” uprising in North Korea. Tight control on foreign journalists precludes a diet of lies, deceit and misinformation. Would the populace embrace South Korean troops as ethnically similar liberators or foreign conquerors and resist them with military attacks, civil war or insurgency?

Previous US attempts at regime change didn’t work out well, the most recent examples being Iraq and Libya. The peaceful revolutions in Eastern Europe in the 1990s occurred in large part because the overseeing superpower — the Soviet Union — acquiesced in the collapse of its Warsaw Pact allies. There is no evidence that China would be so accommodating during a North Korean crisis.

**Proceed Cautiously**

There are, of course, no easy solutions to the North Korean problem. But the most sensible is to drastically increase pressure on the regime and its foreign facilitators through a comprehensive, integrated strategy. While leaving the door open for eventual negotiations, the US must concurrently take necessary steps to ensure it has sufficient defenses for itself and its allies. Such a strategy achieves the near-term objectives of responding to North Korea’s serial violations of UN resolutions and international law and providing incentives for Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table.

Rather than sudden regime change through military action from outside North Korea, change is more likely to come from within. But creating the conditions for such internal change requires rigorous and enduring support from the outside. External pressure can augment internal pressure against the regime, undermining its foundations and enabling the North Korean people to eventually bring about the downfall of the Kim regime.

Such a long-term strategy shares many characteristics of the Cold War strategy toward the Soviet Union — deterrence, containment, pressure, punishment and undermining regime legitimacy by countering propaganda and advocating for human rights and the rule of law. Key components would be:

- **Isolate North Korea economically and diplomatically.** The US must go beyond sanctions and diplomacy to include a full-court press to diplomatically and economically isolate North Korea from the international community and shake the regime’s stability.

**Increase information operations** to promote greater North Korean exposure to the outside world. Promoting democracy and access to information in North Korea is in both the strategic and humanitarian interests of the US. Improving access to information will help the people of North Korea and provide a means of influencing the country from the inside out. As demonstrated by US and West German efforts during the Cold War, technology and media can play a crucial role in undermining totalitarian regimes.

**Target North Korean human rights violations.** Advocacy for human rights must be a part of a comprehensive US policy on North Korea. Stigmatizing the regime for its barbaric treatment of its people is consistent with American values and principles, provides an additional means to sanction the regime, and allows for greater traction in gaining international condemnation and punitive action against Pyongyang.

**Conclusion**

The consequences of removing Kim Jong Un would be vast and impossible to predict. Of course, policymakers might hope that regime change would lead to the gentle collapse of the government and peaceful unification with South Korea. But a poorly executed regime change, particularly if the US and its allies had a hand in it, could resemble the antiques-store adage of “you broke it, you own it.” A sudden collapse of North Korea could find Seoul with an ugly baby on its doorstep — unwanted but having to be cared for. As such, regime change scenarios need to be the subject of extensive and co-ordinated planning among the allies. But it seems that forced, quick regime change risks being far more dangerous than the current status quo. Instead, careful planning to develop an environment in which regime change can occur is the more prudent course.

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