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?

ESSAYS BY
Melissa Hanham 8
Yohanes Sulaiman 12
Markus Schiller 16
Muthiah Alagappa 24
Paul Barrett 28
Stephan Haggard 32
Robert Gallucci 37
Peter Hayes 40
Haksoon Paik 46
Taewoo Kim 50
Bruce Klingner 56
Patrick McEachern 60
Why We Must Learn to Live With a Nuclear North Korea
By Yohanes Sulaiman

Amid all of the protracted debate over how best to get North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons program, including tougher and more targeted sanctions and calls for China to rein in its recalcitrant neighbor, a stark reality crouches on the horizon and awaits acknowledgment from a reluctant world: those efforts have failed. It’s time for the world to accept a nuclear North Korea and manage the consequences, writes Yohanes Sulaiman.

The global attempt to denuclearize the Korean Peninsula has failed. Like it or not, North Korea is already a nuclear state, and sooner or later, it will have the means to reach the continental United States with a ballistic missile, despite all the threats and entreaties from its neighbors and the US. The world needs to learn to live with this new reality, unless it is willing to pick the only option left on the table: the unappealing option of war, which will be messy and will cost significantly in human lives and treasure.

The reason is simple: for Kim Jong Un, North Korea’s nuclear program has two main purposes: domestically, to show his people and the political elite that he is firmly in control, that he cannot be pushed around even by China and the US; and internationally, to prevent any attempt (real or imagined) at a regime change in North Korea. Therefore, at this point, it is simply impossible for Kim to back down from this position. North Korea’s nuclear and missile tests will have to continue. It is the raison d’être of the regime.

While there are many scholars and security experts — and even US President Donald Trump — who argue that China could and should do more to end North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, it is very doubtful that Beijing could actually force Pyongyang to stop. Granted, China could strangle North Korea economically, but only to a certain extent, before the country collapses. But that is not in China’s interests. My aims in this essay are several. First is to explain North Korea’s desire for nuclear weapons, which can only be understood through the lens of the North Korean leadership’s singular goal: the preservation of the Kim Dynasty. And that, in turn, drives North Korea’s opportunistic, independent foreign policy, which historically avoids allowing itself to be overly dependent on either China or Russia, leaving both Beijing and Moscow with little leverage over the North’s leadership. The second aim is to explain why there are only two options left on the table: keep negotiating with North Korea with the end result being a nuclear North Korea, or go to war, with its messy implications. Finally, I will elaborate on the implications of a nuclear North Korea for the region and how decision-makers could prevent a regional nuclear arms race.

The Pursuit of Nuclear Weapons Under Kim Il Sung
North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons started in the 1950s under Kim Il Sung, who feared that his country “could become helpless prey to the US nuclear monster,” especially after revelations that the administration of US President Harry Truman seriously considered the possibility of using nuclear weapons on North Korean troops during the Korean War.1 At the same time, however, he was caught in a dilemma. While he needed the protection of the Soviet Union’s nuclear umbrella, he also distrusted Moscow’s intentions toward North Korea — and toward him personally. This became more imperative after the death of Joseph Stalin, when the Soviet Union under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev pursued a campaign of “peaceful co-existence” with the Western Bloc and de-Stalinization, which denounced “the cult of personality” around Stalin. Those policies were in contrast to Kim Il Sung’s own ambition to unite the Korean Peninsula by force, and at the same time, threatened the idea of Kim Il Sung as the supreme leader of North Korea.2 As a result, Kim decided to purge the pro-Moscow North Korean political elite, who came to be seen as threats, and at the same time pursue the policy of self-sufficiency known as juche to prevent North Korea from becoming overly dependent on the goodwill of Moscow. The purge was so successful that by 1961, Kim Il Sung boasted to an Albanian colleague: “[Khrushchev] cannot remove me from power. I hold the power here and whoever rises up against me, I will cut his head off and take measures against him.”3 The Cuban Missile Crisis was the final straw that broke the North Korea-Soviet relationship. Khrushchev’s humiliating retreat destroyed Moscow’s credibility in the eyes of Kim Il Sung on the question of whether it would be willing to defend North Korea in case of an attack by the US. China, with its aggressive and militant foreign policy, was seen as a more convincing bulwark against Washington. The fall of Khrushchev in October 1964, however, again changed Kim Il Sung’s calculations. In essence, it ended the Soviet threats to his position at an opportune time, when the relationship with China plummeted due to Pyongyang refusing Beijing’s attempt to force it to replicate the Cultural Revolution that was sweeping China. The relationship with Beijing deteriorated so much that the Red Guards denounced Kim as a “fat revisionist” and armed clashes occurred along the Sino-North Korean border in 1969.4

While he later repaired the relationship with China, those experiences showed Kim Il Sung that he simply could not fully trust either China or Russia. They might stab him in the back should it fit their agenda, and there was also a possibility they would try to replace him as the supreme leader of North Korea. Thus, the only way for Kim and his dynasty to survive was through the spirit of juche, self-reliance, including in the security area through nuclear weapons. Thus, he had to put the country on a nuclear path to provide his own nuclear umbrella, to preserve the Kim Dynasty, and this policy was continued by his successors, Kim Jong Il and Kim Jong Un.

Succession Dilemma
The main difference between North Korean nuclear policy under both Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, on the one hand, and Kim Jong Un, on the other, lies in the security of the regime. Unlike Kim Jong Un, Kim Jong Il had been groomed for the leadership position for many years before the death of Kim Il Sung. Kim Il Sung himself had already eliminated or sidelined every single possible contender to Kim Jong Il’s position — including his own brother. Therefore, the first North Korean nuclear talks of 1993-1994 were in essence, a demonstration by Kim Jong Il that he could manage relations with the US.5 In other words, North Korea was willing to talk then simply because it was in the interests of Kim Jong Il to talk, to solidify his position as the true successor to Kim Il Sung, both domestically and internationally. Having achieved that, he decided to simply ignore the agreement and kept pursuing nuclear capabilities, something that became more and more urgent following the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s regime in Iraq after the US-led invasion. The ascension of Kim Jong Un, however, was a vastly different affair. He is young and insecure, and unlike Kim Jong Il, was not groomed for succession over a period of years. The North Korean economy

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was in shambles due to years of sanctions and mismanagement. He had many possible threats to his position, such as his uncle, Jang Song-thaek, who while not openly challenging him, was seen as very close to the leadership in Beijing and was also married to the only daughter of his grandfather — and thus could potentially be a replacement for him as the successor of Kim Il Sung, or at least could launch a palace coup that would position Jang as the real leader behind the throne.

As a result, Kim Jong Un lifted a strategy straight from the playbook of his grandfather: he executed those posing possible threats to his position, including his uncle and his own half-brother, and built a reputation as a ruthless autocrat unwilling to tolerate dissent, even among the upper echelons of the political elite — and also as a strong leader, unwilling to bend to pressures from either the US or China. Thus, here we have a very insecure regime, headed by a young and inexperienced leader, that ties its legitimacy to demonstrations of strength — with nuclear weapons as the pinnacle of power. Therefore, for Kim Jong Un’s regime, there is no possibility to back down through denuclearization or the halting of missile tests, because this would be a sign of weakness. Besides, the regime has tied its legitimacy to its primary goal, a nuclearized North Korea. Failure to achieve this would signal weakness to the rest of the country’s cowed political elite and might actually lead them to revolt.

**Diplomacy or War?**

At this point, diplomacy simply does not work, because it cannot give both sides what they want: for the US and its allies, a denuclearized Korean Peninsula; for North Korea, nuclear weapons as a means of self-preservation. Kim Jong Un saw what happened to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi, who surrendered his nuclear ambitions and ended up deposed, humiliated and killed.

Kim Jong Un and his people will negotiate, but at the end of the day, they will present a fait accompli: they have nukes. The country is now a nuclear-capable state with missiles potentially capable of hitting the continental United States. In short, the world simply needs to deal with that reality. For Pyongyang, giving up nukes at this stage would risk a massive backlash domestically, because it would signal that the Kim Jong Un regime is vulnerable to outside pressures. That would undermine the regime.

The problem, of course, is that this is unacceptable to everyone else — especially the US. While Trump and the world have been leaning on China to curb North Korea’s nuclear ambitions, I believe this is a futile effort. North Korea does not trust China and does not feel indebted to it. The regime only acts according to the interests of the Kim Dynasty.

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And worse, I don’t think China actually has a backup plan, in the event it cannot control Kim Jong Un. And Kim Jong Un has made sure that China has no alternative to the Kim family: witness the murder of his half-brother in Kuala Lumpur in February 2017, who lived in Macau and was considered to be under the protection of the Chinese government. Without any legitimate contender from the Kim family, should Kim Jong Un fall from power due to health issues or murder, the North Korean state, which revolves around the Kim family, could end up in a civil war and implode, fulfilling China’s worst-case scenario. Therefore, China can actually do nothing. It can only carefully maintain lifelines to North Korea, hoping that the country can and will reform its economy and change its nuclear policy.

Therefore, the only option to curb North Korea’s nuclear arsenal appears to be war, a pre-emptive war, with all its complexities, which I really doubt is supported by South Korea, Japan, and even the US itself, despite all of the bluster from the White House. And the US cannot launch limited strikes, because North Korea would respond by escalating any limited strikes into a general war, because any unanswered action would undermine the regime’s legitimacy.

North Korea knows there is no support for war in Seoul and Washington, based on reactions from South Korea and the US to all of its provocations, such as the sinking in 2010 of the South Korean naval corvette Cheonan. There is simply no appetite to go to war in the region.

**Dealing with a Nuclear North Korea**

Since nobody wants to go to war and North Korea will not halt its nuclear program, then the world simply has to prepare for the inevitability of a nuclear North Korea — and also, probably, a nuclearized South Korea and Japan, especially if they lose faith in the US nuclear guarantee, due to US fears that any major escalation of the situation in Northeast Asia could lead to war with China.

At the same time, it is very doubtful that North Korea would use its nuclear capabilities to strike South Korea, Japan or even the US, because Pyongyang knows it cannot win the war that would ensue. Any attempt to do so would lead to massive retaliation that would destroy the Kim Dynasty, which would defeat the very purpose of North Korea’s nuclear weapons.

**Three Steps**

So, what should decision-makers be doing in dealing with North Korea?

First, and most important, the US needs to keep reassuring its allies, Japan and South Korea, that it remains committed to providing a nuclear umbrella, regardless of whether North Korea has a missile that can reach the continental US. It needs to keep stressing to both Japan and South Korea that it is actually not in their best interest to acquire their own nuclear weapons.

Second, Japan, South Korea and the US need to keep pressuring other countries, especially China and Russia, to maintain a policy of containment. Forget the fiction that North Korea is willing to negotiate to give up its nuclear weapons and missile programs. It will not. What its neighboring states need to do is to keep isolating the regime both politically and economically, until it either self-implodes — although that would take a long time, given the lifeline provided to the regime by China — or reforms itself.

Third, craft a common agenda to frustrate any attempts by North Korea to sell its nuclear weapons. In fact, the biggest threat from a nuclear North Korea actually comes from its willingness to export its nuclear technology to the highest bidders in order to keep its economy afloat and its ruling class happy with luxuries. This could inadvertently lead to nuclear proliferation all over the world, especially in troubled hotspots such as the Middle East.

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