

The Trump Administration's Policy on the DPRK Nuclear Program

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Policy toward the DPRK nuclear programs stands out as one of the few issues on which the Trump Administration has focused considerable attention since taking office, other than those issues which candidate Trump focused on during his campaign.

The origin of this relatively intense focus seems to be the first meeting between President-elect Trump and President Obama. The out-going president reportedly told his successor that the DPRK nuclear program was the most dangerous situation that he would face when he assumed the office of President. Given how little attention President Obama gave personally to this issue, it is hard to understand why Obama decided to focus on the DPRK among the many crises facing the world – Syria, Lebanon, South China Sea, South Sudan.

We do not know whether Obama gave Trump any specific policy suggestions beyond telling him that the problem required immediate attention. Perhaps Obama finally came to understand that the DPRK was moving very rapidly to acquire a capability to fire nuclear-tipped missiles against the American homeland. "Strategic patience," he may have realized, was not working. It seems just to have been a label for assuming that the current sanctions would eventually lead the DPRK to give up its nuclear program.

Trump emerged from his meeting reporting publicly that Obama had urged him to focus on this issue. He quickly denounced "strategic patience" and asserted that he had a new policy that would be much more effective.

Trump quickly decided that China was the key to this problem. The DPRK nuclear program was elevated to the priority of US-PRC relations ahead of trade and currency manipulation. The Trump effort to use a threat to change Taiwan policy to get the PRC to persuade the DPRK to suspend its nuclear program was quickly abandoned under Chinese pressure.

In his meeting with Xi Jinping, Trump seems to have focused on the DPRK and pressed China to bring a halt to its nuclear program. The Chinese President reportedly responded with a lecture which led Trump to understand that the problem was more difficult and complicated than he had imagined. No doubt the Chinese leader complained about Kim Jong-un and explained that he was determined to accelerate his nuclear program. Sanctions, Xi would have noted, were not by themselves sufficient to change his mind.

In his briefing for the summit meeting, no matter how short, Trump would have been told that China wanted to see a de-nuclearized Korean Peninsula, but placed a much higher priority on maintaining a stable peninsula. What the Chinese fear most is a collapse in the North leading to

a mass migration into China, a united Korea probably with nuclear weapons, and American military forces on its border.

Trump seems to have emerged from the summit meeting convinced that the Chinese would try harder, but accepting that sanctions and other pressure alone would not be sufficient to end the DPRK nuclear program.

What else should be added to the mix beyond the usual ritual announcement that “nothing is off the table.” That phrase is usually understood to mean that we reserve the right to use military force. Like all previous American administrations, it looked hard at that question. Trump was told by the military what it has told all previous administrations without hesitation or nuance: the initiation of force by the United States is not a viable option.

This is not only because the DPRK now may have a small operational nuclear force capable of reaching targets in the region and be ready to use that force in a pre-emptive strike against the massing of conventional forces for an invasion. More than sufficient to deter an attack, Trump would have been told, was the DPRK conventional and chemical capability in artillery well dug in just north of the DMZ. This force can inflict massive damage on the civilian population of Seoul and his suburbs before the weapons could be destroyed. The DPRK could be completely defeated in a conventional war in days, but only after it had inflicted unacceptable casualties on the South.

The Trump Administration’s review of Korea policy thus in a very short period led to the rejection of three strategies. First, “strategic patience” was rejected, having failed to slow the DPRK nuclear program and showing no sign of stopping it. Second, the policy of relying entirely on the PRC had to be abandoned when the Chinese made clear that they were not willing to use their full power to stop the DPRK nuclear program at the risk of triggering regime collapse. Resort to force, at least as an early option, was rejected in face of the realities on the ground and the strong military objections.

So, quickly and with little apparent controversy, the Trump Administration seems to have adopted the broad outlines of an approach. No option is off the table but the preemptive use of military force. The PRC will be looked to for leadership and pressed to use its leverage to bring the DPRK to the table while freezing its nuclear program. The USG will seek stronger UNSC sanctions while pressing China and all other countries to fully implement the existing and any new sanctions. Finally, there seems to be acceptance of the need for negotiations with the PRC but no consensus on how to get the negotiations started or how to conduct them.

I would argue, especially in comparison to policy on other foreign policy issues, that this progression has been remarkable and encouraging. There now comes the difficult task of developing policy on the pre-conditions, if any, for negotiations, and the goals and sequencing of the negotiations. Other than affirming that the goal must be the verifiable and complete de-nuclearization of the peninsula, the administration position awaits formulation.

With the visit of new South Korean President, Moon Jae-in, to Washington now set for late June, the Trump Administration seems to be focused on preparing for this meeting and not on making any additional decisions about the details of its DPRK policy.

Thus, much will depend on what proposals President Moon will bring to Washington and how successful he will be in persuading President Trump to accept his proposals.

With the permission of my three co-authors I draw on a paper the four of us have written and which presents a way forward which we believe is in the interests of all six parties and the greater international community and which we believe is consistent with how each party defines its interests.<sup>1</sup>

Here is a proposed three step process which I hope President Moon will bring to his meeting in Washington and which I hope President Trump will accept.

**Phase 1:** Initial agreement is reached that:

- a) North Korea will freeze quickly all nuclear and missile tests and fissile material production, including enrichment, either simultaneously or in a defined sequence and timeline, allowing the IAEA and possibly US inspectors to monitor and verify these steps;
- b) In return for suspension of testing, the United States and South Korea will scale back joint exercises, especially deployment of strategic bombers, and lift the US Trading with the Enemy Act for a third time. In return for freeze on all fissile material production, allies will commence scaled down, and, rapid, sensible energy assistance to the DPRK for small-scale cooperation on power generation, provide some humanitarian food and agricultural technical aid, and medical assistance, and commit to begin a peace process during phase 2.

The Six Party Talks will resume on the on basis that (1) there are no preconditions; (2) all issues can be considered; and (3) each phase can be implemented as talks proceed with nothing agreed in each phase until everything in the phase is agreed.

Phase 1 can be done in a series of reciprocal steps over a relatively short time frame (roughly three to six months).

**Phase 2:** Six Party Talks resume, and North Korea undertakes initial dismantlement of all nuclear materials production facilities, including enrichment declaration and disablement, verified by IAEA and possibly US inspectors.

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<sup>1</sup> “ENDING THE NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR THREAT BY A COMPREHENSIVE SECURITY SETTLEMENT IN NORTHEAST ASIA” Morton Halperin, Peter Hayes, Thomas Pickering, and Leon Sigal, May 25, 2017.

In return, the United States, China, and the two Koreas commence a “peace process” to bring about a Northeast Asia “peace regime.” The Korea focus of this regime would be a non-hostility declaration and military confidence-building measures culminating in the replacement of the Korean Armistice with a peace treaty acceptable to all parties. At the same time, the six parties would establish a regional security structure including a regional Security Council, and would take initial steps to create a Northeast Asian security and economic community and cooperative security measures on a range of shared security concerns.

The United States and South Korea would adjust in an incremental and calibrated manner their unilateral sanctions to allow for a phased resumption of trade and investment with North Korea, among them, revival of the Kaesong industrial zone by South Korea.

One issue to be resolved early in talks would be whether missile production facilities will also be designated for dismantlement and controlled by the agreement in defined ways.

South Korea will also initiate discussions with the other five on a Northeast Asia Peace Regime.

Definition of what Phase 2 will cover can be done in a few months, but implementation of measures required of the DPRK side will take several years to complete in verified manner. Initial nuclear safety and security measures, and early energy cooperation steps, may be undertaken in six to eighteen months.

Likewise, a peace and regional security process can begin in Phase 2, but completion of key elements of each of these interrelated elements will take years. North Korea will want to see the result tested over multiple administrations representing both parties in the United States and South Korea to see if a peace regime is durable before they give up their weapons and weapons-usable fissile materials.

This leads into Phase 3.

**Phase 3:** Declaration and implementation of a legally binding Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone by the other five parties for eventual acceptance and entry by the DPRK in lockstep with agreed timelines and specific actions to eliminate nuclear weapons by the DPRK; and commitment to come into full non-nuclear compliance over an agreed timeline, in return for lifting of multilateral and unilateral sanctions, large-scale energy-economic assistance package as part of a regional development strategy, successful experience with no US hostile intent and conclusion of a peace treaty, and a calibrated nuclear negative security assurance to the North from the Nuclear Weapons States as part of the NWFZ treaty.

Phase 3 may take ten years to complete, maybe longer, during which incremental nuclear weapons disarmament may be undertaken by the North and verified by the other parties to the NWFZ as part of a regional inspectorate, accompanied by effective implementation of peaceful

relations by the five parties. Phase 3 would enable a presidential summit to take place “under the right conditions” within two to three years from now.

I am not predicting that either the ROK or the USG will adopt this proposal. I am say that it is consistent with their interests and past statements and that there is some chance that the DPRK would accept it. Only by trying can we find out.

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