Executive Summary

A group of 30 Naval War College (NWC) faculty met in early February to consider all dimensions of the volatile North Korea (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea—DPRK) nuclear crisis. The faculty members comprised Asia-Pacific security experts and theorists on nuclear strategy, as well as specialists with extensive military operational experience. The all-day seminar consisted of wide-ranging discussions and debates, in addition to a survey portion. A summary of the results of the special seminar follows below.

There was a consensus among faculty experts that:

• the DPRK is primarily motivated by regime security and the US/ROK can rely on deterrence.
• the DPRK is unlikely to give up all of its nuclear capabilities.
• the foremost US goal should be avoiding catastrophic war.
• the US-ROK alliance remains strong.
• ROK president Moon Jae-in’s engagement strategy with the DPRK has some prospect of success.
• China is only minimally committed to denuclearization and there is a significant chance of a US-China military clash in almost any Korean conflict scenario.
• a limited strike on the DPRK would likely start a wider war and would not likely facilitate DPRK denuclearization.
• a naval embargo likely would not be decisive in pressuring the DPRK.
• the USN enjoys vast superiority over DPRK naval forces.

Yet there were many difficult issues that NWC faculty participants disagreed about as well. There was no faculty consensus on:

• the nature of DPRK decision-making.
• whether to negotiate directly with DPRK leadership.
• what kinds of “carrots,” if any, might result in denuclearization.
• whether economic sanctions would be effective to coerce DPRK denuclearization.
• what a Chinese military intervention might look like.
• whether the DPRK will have a genuine ICBM capability in the near future.
• whether the USN/USMC are capable of playing a decisive role in a hypothetical armed conflict.
• whether a full naval embargo would prompt the start of major hostilities.
• whether the developing DPRK submarine force represents a significant threat.
This “sense of the faculty” study seeks to convey the assessments of the NWC faculty in a timely and concise form on issues of major concern for US decision makers. The effort is unique in at least three respects. First, there is a commitment to focusing on the in-house talent at the Naval War College. NWC professors are neither constrained by rigid bureaucracies, nor beholden to sponsors for research contracts, nor so close to events that they are chasing headlines. They have a uniquely objective set of viewpoints built on broad and deep intellectual experience. Second, this study aims to gauge faculty viewpoints through the use of surveys. While not without pitfalls, this methodology has the advantage of delivering crisp assessments to decision makers in an efficient format. Third and finally, this study embraces an academic approach to policy formulation that emphasizes open and informed debate. There was no expectation that participants would agree on the major issues, nor was there an expected institutional answer. Quite the contrary, the faculty were encouraged to offer counterarguments and explore unpopular ideas. Laying bare the best possible arguments on these complex issues, the 12 debates presented in this report offer the opportunity for policy makers to make informed decisions on strategy. Objectively weighing the costs and benefits of any given policy initiative requires considering alternative sides of an issue.

This report presents two sets of results. Part 1 discusses the faculty survey and summarizes the discussions during the seminar. Part 2 presents the most important part of the study: a series of 12 debates that emerged directly from the faculty discussion in the February seminar. During that seminar, the discussion was organized around five basic themes: (A) the internal dynamics of the DPRK regime, (B) the US-ROK alliance and its prospects, (C) sanctions, opportunities for negotiations, and the role of other major states, (D) military options, and finally (E) implications for naval strategy. Note that this academic study does not reflect classified assessments in any way or the official policies of the US government.
Part 1 Survey and Discussion Summary

Session A – Internal Dynamics of the DPRK Regime

The first session discussed internal aspects of the DPRK regime and how the nature of the regime in Pyongyang could impact the crisis, or even any use of force. A majority (55%) of faculty participants characterized the DPRK ruling regime as “moderately stable.” Others viewed the regime as either “highly stable” (23%) or “not stable” (23%), but no respondents viewed the DPRK regime as on the “verge of collapse.” A related question surveyed faculty regarding the outlook for the North Korean economy under the current sanctions effort. Half of respondents (50%) said the situation amounted to a “manageable crisis” for the DPRK, but a significant minority (34%) took the view that the economic crisis would be severe enough to cause some of the North Korean population to starve.

As to the all-important purpose or cause of the North Korean nuclear weapons program, NWC faculty participants were nearly universal (91%) in maintaining that the primary motivating factor for Pyongyang is “regime security.” A couple of respondents believed the chief cause to be “internal politics,” while only one faculty member viewed “coerced unification” as the main purpose of the DPRK nuclear weapons program.

Participants actively debated whether the present regime in Pyongyang is “rational” and could be deterred. One participant questioned whether a rational leadership in Pyongyang would have engaged in the highly risky gambit of sinking a South Korean frigate in 2010. But another participant argued that deterrence has been successful for more than 60 years, since North Korea has not moved in force south of the 38th Parallel. Participants registered significant uncertainty regarding how centralized and cohesive the North Korean regime is. Further discussion examined similarities and differences between North Korea and East European countries in the late 1980s. There was also an extensive debate about whether constructive negotiations could be held with Pyongyang. A wide consensus believed that Pyongyang was very unlikely to part with its new nuclear arsenal.

Session B – The US-ROK Alliance

A second session focused on decision-making in both Seoul and Washington, as well as their interaction within the alliance. NWC faculty participants were asked to choose a “top priority” for US policy on the peninsula. A 55% majority of respondents answered that “avoiding catastrophic war” should be the foremost goal of US policy. By contrast, only 16% suggested that the main objective was “denuclearization.” Slightly more, 19%, viewed the objective as “maintain the political and economic status quo.” Just 6% of respondents believed that “preventing Chinese hegemony” should be the main goal. With regard to the US-ROK alliance, most respondents (74%) believed that the alliance is “strong,” but a significant minority (23%) held that it is actually “not strong.” Notably, no NWC faculty characterized the alliance as “weak.”

Over half (52%) of NWC experts believed that ROK president Moon Jae-in’s engagement strategy with North Korea has “some prospect of success,” while 16% predicted “no major impact” and 19% said such success was “unlikely.” 55% of NWC faculty respondents also thought the ROK was “not likely” to develop its own nuclear weapons, while 16% viewed ROK nuclear weapons as “likely” and 26% said the likelihood is “unknown.”

This session witnessed heated debate among NWC faculty participants on a range of issues. There was broad agreement on the increasing salience of a “wedge” developing between Seoul and Washington that Pyongyang may try to amplify and manipulate. A consensus also seemed to hold among participants that the ROK maintains substantial conventional superiority over the DPRK. Even if a DPRK invasion could be deterred, participants agreed that low-level provocation would remain a problem for deterrence. Significant division was evident among participants on whether Seoul might, or even should, acquire its own nuclear arsenal, with one faculty member arguing that this would place critical pressure on Beijing to act more forcefully. Some suggested it could be stabilizing, while others argued that such a development would be totally contrary to US nonproliferation policies. Regarding the overall crisis, one faculty member argued that Washington should continue to “do nothing,” in keeping with an approach characterized as quite successful. On the other side, however, a faculty member argued that Washington should not be “fooled again” and had to take ever more robust steps to isolate and punish North Korea. A participant suggested that strengthening the trilateral relationship that includes Japan would enhance the US alliance system. One faculty member noted that there remains strong support in South Korea for the alliance, but that President Moon has sought assurances from the Trump administration that there would be no military action without prior consultation between Seoul and Washington.
Session C – Sanctions, Diplomacy, and other Major Players

The third session considered the prospects for diplomacy and economic sanctions, as well as the closely related issue of other major actors, such as China. Considering the question of how committed Beijing is to the goal of denuclearization, a strong majority (63%) of NWC faculty suggested that China was only “minimally committed” to that goal. Still, 20% believed Beijing to be “significantly committed,” while some 17% maintained that China is “not committed” to denuclearization. Regarding the possibility of a US-China military clash in the event that Washington initiates large-scale hostilities on the peninsula, 40% of respondents believed the chances of such a clash to be “high,” with an additional 24% suggesting the chances were “very high.” 17% of faculty participants rated the prospect as “moderate” and 21% held the chance of a US-China military clash on the Korean Peninsula as “low.”

The session also briefly broached the subject of Russia’s role in the North Korea nuclear crisis. NWC faculty participants were asked whether they thought Russia might play a “positive, bridging role” to Pyongyang. Respondents were skeptical on this point, with 52% considering the possibility to be “rather unlikely.” Still, another 28% thought it was “possible” and 10% suggested it was “quite possible” or even “extremely possible.” Continuing on the theme of diplomacy, NWC faculty participants had a wide variety of viewpoints regarding how “carrots,” or incentives, might be employed to persuade Pyongyang to enter into an arms-control agreement. Just over a quarter of respondents (28%) held that no carrots were likely to succeed. However, 21% thought diplomatic recognition could be effective, while 14% each considered either a suspension of the annual US-ROK joint military exercise or a symbolic troop withdrawal to be the most effective inducements for North Korea. Other ideas drawing some support (10%) as carrots that might impress Kim Jong-un included either top-level meetings or security assurances.

The third session covered a lot of ground. There was a debate on the effectiveness of sanctions, with one faculty member arguing that Pyongyang was essentially immune to economic pressure, since its elites would not feel the pain. But other faculty maintained that sanctions played a crucial role in organizing the global community against North Korea. Faculty discussed a variety of incentives that might be applied in the context of negotiations, and the point was made that a stronger agreement will be one that is “irreversible,” since Pyongyang also needs to feel that the agreement will not fall apart as policies change with a future US administration (as may be the case with the Iran nuclear agreement). Debate occurred on whether the DPRK nuclear capability could actually be “stabilizing,” but some faculty felt strongly that a window of opportunity for strong action is “time-limited” and that the US should avoid prematurely “taking options off the table.” There was significant debate on the respective roles of China and Russia. One faculty participant articulated a view that Beijing would use a military conflict opportunistically, for example to move against Taiwan. Another argued that China was applying surprisingly stringent sanctions against North Korea, even exceeding expectations in that regard. On Russia, one expert suggested that Moscow has little incentive to help out Washington, but other faculty experts maintained that Russia could have surprisingly influential channels into North Korea.

Session D – Military Options

The fourth session focused on military options to resolve the North Korea nuclear crisis. A major finding from this session was that the vast majority of NWC faculty respondents believed the US and South Korea could rely on deterrence to prevent the outbreak of major war on the peninsula. 79% of respondents said the prospects for deterrence were either “reasonably high” or “high.” Just 7% of NWC faculty participants rated the likely effectiveness of deterrence as “low” and none said “very low.” Considering the possible impact of a “bloody nose”—a conventional and limited strike against the DPRK—none of the NWC expert respondents believed this would “shock the Kim regime into denuclearization talks.” The vast majority of respondents believed the result would be either limited or full-scale war. A majority (57%) surmised the strike would result in “tit-for-tat hostilities,” while 21% thought the result would be “conventional war” and 14% thought “all-out nuclear war” would be the result.

NWC faculty were asked about a hypothetical Chinese military intervention in response to a US initiation of hostilities against the DPRK. 41% said Beijing’s objective would be to secure a “border buffer,” but another 33% suggested the primary Chinese goal would be to prevent US-ROK forces from crossing the inter-Korean border. 22% said Chinese forces would seek to “secure the North Korean regime.” Another question asked of NWC faculty participants concerned what they regarded to be primary targets for nuclear strikes by North Korea. Among possible targets, a majority (46%) held that Pyongyang would target “US military forces in theater” as the highest priority, while 25% thought American cities would be the primary target. 18% viewed Japan as the most likely target, while South Korea was viewed (11%) as quite unlikely to be targeted by North Korean nuclear forces.
The session predictably also had some intense debate regarding possible US military options. Most NWC faculty experts raised major objections to the US initiating military action against North Korea. One faculty member stated emphatically that a “disarming US strike is not possible … It is very clear they will retaliate with nuclear weapons.” Another asked pointedly: “Where are the off-ramps?” It was also suggested that North Korea has many options below the nuclear threshold, to include use of chemical rounds. The point was also raised that misperception could result in all-out war once mobilization of various forces was set in motion. Along the same lines, another professor noted that accurate signaling in a crisis can be extremely difficult. Still, some faculty participants objected that the current trend was simply unsustainable, given their view that Pyongyang is evidently seeking to blackmail Washington by holding American cities hostage. Moreover, other faculty pointed out that the US has many options at its disposal so that “attacks” need not necessarily involve kinetic combat actions, and moreover that some strikes could be “unattributed.” Naval targets were viewed as presenting a plausible firebreak in a process of military escalation. Still, a counterargument was made that in dealing with a “paranoid” regime, it would not be ideal to “punch them in the face.” Also, the point was made that deterrence situations have historically developed in a rather stable way after an initial period of instability. Finally, several faculty participants noted that China would behave opportunistically in the case of a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Session E – The Significance for US Navy Strategy

During the fifth session, on implications for the US Navy, NWC faculty responded that sea mines represent the greatest threat to American ships operating near the peninsula. 45% said this was the greatest threat, while 21% were most concerned about the submarine threat and another 24% prioritized the threat posed by antiship cruise missiles. Only a single faculty member considered nuclear weapons to be a major threat to US ships at sea. A rather different question concerned whether China might retaliate against US action on the Korean Peninsula by undertaking a military campaign in the South China Sea. 21% of NWC faculty experts thought this was “quite likely,” while 45% said they were “uncertain” about this possibility. But 31% considered that scenario to be “quite unlikely.”

NWC faculty participants were rather divided in their assessment of a naval embargo on North Korea. While 34% thought it “unlikely” that a “full embargo” would ignite hostilities on the peninsula, 31% considered this possibility to be “likely.” 24% were uncertain about whether a war would result from a “full embargo” on Pyongyang’s commercial shipping. A final survey question concerned the emergent North Korean submarine-launched ballistic-missile capability. NWC faculty participants were not extremely concerned, with 42% of respondents saying the threat was “minimal.” However, 38% said this threat was “moderate,” and 15% called it a “significant” challenge.

During the fifth and final session, the issue of China was again debated. Some felt that China might take extraordinary steps in deploying its naval power during a Korean contingency, such as by acting to further militarize the South China Sea or even by blockading Taiwan. The point was made that, in the minds of Chinese leaders, the Korean and Taiwan issues are linked historically, both having resulted from the same decisions made early in the Cold War. Most faculty took the view that North Korea does not present a major challenge to the US Navy. One stated: “The carriers are not vulnerable.” Another evaluated that Iraq had posed a greater threat to the US Navy than does North Korea. However, some asserted that the USN does not have a sufficient number of BMD-capable ships, that the USN and USMC are “not ready” for genuinely large-scale amphibious operations, and that the USN’s strike munitions are not optimized for hitting deeply buried targets. Another debate concerned the strategic implications of an embargo on North Korean shipping.
Session 1 Question 3
What is the most important factor causing North Korea to seek nuclear weapons?

- To coerce unification
- Regime security
- Internal politics
- Aging conventional forces
- Prestige

Session 2 Question 1
What is the top priority US national interest on the Korean Peninsula?

- Denuclearization
- Supporting an ally
- Prevent Chinese hegemony
- Avoid catastrophic war
- Maintain political and economic status quo

Session 2 Question 2
How strong and stable is the US-ROK alliance?

- Very Strong
- Strong
- Not strong
- Quite weak
- Very weak
Session 3 Question 2
What is the chance of a direct US-China clash within a scenario where the US initiates large-scale hostilities with the DPRK?

- Very high
- High
- Moderate
- Low
- Very low

Session 4 Question 1
If the US and South Korea opt to rely on deterrence, what are the prospects for success in deterring major war?

- High
- Reasonably high
- Moderate
- Low
- Very Low

Session 4 Question 3
Assuming the US initiates military action against the DPRK, what would be the primary objective of a hypothetical Chinese intervention?

- Border buffer
- Secure nuclear weapons
- Secure North Korean regime
- Prevent US-ROK forces from crossing the 38th
Debate #1: What Should Be the Primary US Goal?
Debate #2: Can Kim Jong-un Be Deterred?
Debate #3: Why Does DPRK Want Nuclear Weapons?
Debate #4: Will the US and ROK Maintain Alignment?
Debate #5: Could Economic Sanctions Be Effective?
Debate #6: Should US leaders negotiate directly with the North Korean leader?
Debate #7: What should form the agenda for possible US-DPRK direct talks?
Debate #8: What Would Be the Impact of a Limited Strike on the DPRK?
Debate #9: Would China Intervene in a US-DPRK War?
Debate #10: Does North Korea have an ICBM Capability?
Debate #11: Could a Naval Embargo Be Effective in Pressuring the DPRK?
Debate #12: Will the DPRK Pose a Major Challenge to the USN in the Coming Decade?
DEBATE #1: What Should Be the US Primary Goal?

**Denuclearization**

The US goal with respect to North Korea should be full denuclearization and the cessation of North Korea’s ballistic-missile activities. Some argue that the US should simply acquiesce and accept the reality that North Korea has joined the nuclear club, but that would be a mistake for three key reasons.

First, if the US simply acquiesces to a nuclear North Korea, it would contradict US policy statements dating back more than 20 years. It would send a signal to the world that the US is not as serious about nuclear containment (and potential proliferation) as its rhetoric might suggest. Moreover, the NPT regime itself would be placed in even greater peril than it is today. Countries contemplating the development of such capabilities may see this as an opportunity to race forward to achieve their own nuclear objectives, either overtly or surreptitiously.

Second, an acquiescence strategy is predicated on US assumptions that North Korea would be, at most, a small or medium-sized nuclear power. However, this may not be realistic. It is quite possible that North Korea will continue to pursue greater capabilities, both in quantitative and qualitative terms. Some might argue that this is not logical, since such a strategy would incur huge economic costs. But past examples demonstrate that North Korea places greater priority on its nuclear ambitions and military security than on the welfare of its own citizens.

Third, North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic-missile ambitions may disturb the balance of power in Northeast Asia. As the recent Nuclear Posture Review describes, North Korea, due to its “numerous reckless nuclear threats,” poses a “clear and grave threat to US and allied security.” Currently, US allies in the region depend on US extended deterrence guarantees (the “nuclear umbrella”). However, if North Korean capabilities continue to grow, some US allies may contemplate developing their own strategic capabilities, especially if they perceive Washington to be less committed to its traditional alliances, to be less fiscally able to deliver on its security promises, or simply to be preoccupied with domestic challenges and controversies. Preliminary discussions in South Korea and Japan along these lines have already occurred in the media and among certain security planners, a trend that would have been unimaginable just a few years ago.

The bottom line is that the path of least resistance—acquiescence and deterrence—may provide solace in the short term. But this strategy provides no long-term solution. It may buy some time and postpone difficult decisions, but ultimately time is not on our side.

**Deterrence**

The US goal should be to deter North Korea. Stable deterrence is an achievable outcome; in a real sense, it is happening every day. It is dangerous and, from a security standpoint, unnecessary to seek DPRK denuclearization.

Although the Kim regime is provocative, irresponsible, and despotic, it is neither insane nor mindlessly aggressive. While talk of the Korean Peninsula as a powder keg has gone on for decades, there has been no war. North Korea’s more destructive provocations, such as the sinking of the ROKS Cheonan in 2010, do not occur frequently. The status quo has been tolerable and relatively stable for many years.

The fact that Pyongyang denies involvement in the Cheonan sinking today, rather than claiming it as a military success, suggests that they recognize the sinking was counter to existing norms and demonstrates they fear retaliation. Fear of retaliation is, of course, an essential element of a stable deterrent relationship.

When the Soviet Union tested a nuclear weapon in 1949, the United States was deeply concerned, and even considered a preventive strike on the USSR’s nuclear assets in 1950 and afterward. Ultimately, a stable deterrent relationship evolved. The United States considered preventive attacks on China to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons, but a deterrent relationship prevailed. The decades since World War II have shown, again and again, that reluctantly acquiescing to new nuclear states has been the right call.

It is too late to take preventive action against the North Korean nuclear program. Defense Intelligence Agency estimates of the size of the North Korean nuclear arsenal run as high as 60 warheads. A general war on the peninsula would lead to a host of grave uncertainties. The detonation of a single 100-kiloton weapon over the South Korean port of Busan could kill 440,000 immediately. China could become militarily involved, raising the alarming prospect of a Sino-American conflict. A strike on North Korea to eliminate its nuclear capability or overthrow the regime would possibly initiate the most destructive war since 1945. It is not worth running such risks when there is a high likelihood that deterrence would be effective.

The costs and risks of an attack on the Kim regime are too high, and an attack could lead to disastrous repercussions. Deterring North Korea is achievable. Accepting deterrence as the primary goal of the relationship between North Korea and the US is not the best outcome, but it is the most reasonable and safest course.
DEBATE #2: Can Kim Jong-un Be Deterred?

**Yes, Kim Is Not Suicidal**

Some have suggested that deterrence theory may not apply against North Korea, due to the brutal nature of the Kim regime. Whether the DPRK can be deterred is important, but on balance there is little reason to think the North can achieve major coercive gains with nuclear weapons, even if some US/ROK options are constrained.

The largest worry is the DPRK using nuclear weapons to compel US withdrawal from the alliance or even unification on Pyongyang’s terms. This is unlikely. Past proliferators had little success using nuclear weapons to compel others, especially other nuclear powers, as opposed to using nuclear capabilities to deter hostile acts. Pakistan may have hoped that nuclear capability would give it leverage in border disputes with India, but in practice it has gained nothing. Earlier, the US found it impossible to apply nuclear coercion in Korea or Vietnam, given Soviet and Chinese deterrent forces.

The North Korean regime brutalizes many of its people, but oppression of one’s own population is not a predictor of international aggression—certainly not suicidal wars. The regime ideology is not apocalyptic. DPRK behavior since 1953 is consistent with prioritizing regime survival and resisting pressure. US withdrawal may be a goal, but the North is in no position to impose that by a conventional attack. Still less plausible is a nuclear ultimatum without a conventional attack. When the US/ROK refuse, a DPRK nuclear attack would prompt regime-ending retaliation.

From the Pueblo to the Cheonan, North Korea has committed violent provocations, including terrorism. Some nuclear theorists predict that the ultimate regime security of a nuclear deterrent will lead an insecure nation to behave less aggressively. Pyongyang’s risk tolerance and militarized politics may preclude that change, but neither does the North have much obvious to gain from escalating provocations. DPRK nuclear capability limits US/ROK retaliation, but the US/ROK have generally not found it desirable to retaliate in kind anyway. We can reduce exploitable vulnerabilities conventionally, where the US and ROK enjoy a significant advantage.

One specific exception is that deterring DPRK intrawar nuclear use may be challenging. Pyongyang would be rational to go nuclear if the US attempts regime change. Even in a limited military campaign, however, paranoiac and the lessons of Libya and Iraq may lead Pyongyang to perceive threats of regime change. Attacks on the North’s C2ISR and nuclear systems would reinforce suspicions. DPRK capabilities and exercises suggest a doctrine of early nuclear strikes on US regional forces, which is a rational move if regime survival is at stake. Planners should not assume the North can be deterred into a conventional-only fight if the US/ROK initiate a major use of force.

**No, Kim is Unlikely to be deterred**

There are a number of reasons to fear that the North Korean regime cannot be deterred. Each reason suggests a form of undesirable behavior by Pyongyang.

Most simply, the regime may not follow a rational decision-making process, meaning it may not weigh expected costs and benefits when selecting a course of action. The choices of a regime driven by its belief in divine provenance or by emotion instead of cool calculations would be difficult to predict or shape. While regional and deterrence experts have dismissed this possible explanation for a North Korea that cannot be deterred, several more-likely pathways remain in which even a rational North Korean regime would not be deterrable.

For one, the regime is likely to take actions against US allies and interests in the “gray zone,” meaning actions that are too small-scale, incremental, and ambiguous to prompt much of a response. Having watched recent moves by Moscow and Beijing go largely unchallenged in other regions, Pyongyang has likely learned the lesson that there is space for similar efforts on and around the Korean Peninsula.

Furthermore, North Korea’s recently demonstrated near-capability to hit the United States with nuclear weapons could embolden the regime to take even more risks at lower levels of conflict. The North Korean leadership might believe the country’s nuclear arsenal provides it cover for conventional attacks on South Korea, Japan, and/or US forces in theater by deterring or limiting any response to such attacks. Pakistan’s efforts against India appear to have increased as its nuclear program did.

Finally, the regime may attack the US homeland, possibly with nuclear weapons, if it believes—correctly or not—that a US attack is imminent. North Korea’s weak early-warning and communications systems only increase the risk of the regime miscalculating that a US attack is in progress or soon to occur. Moreover, Kim’s top advisors could have incentives to interpret ambiguous information as signs of a US attack and to counsel striking first rather than advocate waiting for clearer information.

Pathologies of the regime itself are likely to exacerbate aspects of the above logic. Outside analysts lack a clear sense of how much access to information Kim has and therefore how practical the basis for any of his decision-making is. He has also demonstrated great comfort with high levels of risk, increasing the chance that any mistake would result in a very bad outcome.
To Coerce Unification

As North Korea’s nuclear weapon and ballistic-missile capabilities continue to grow, analysts have searched for evidence to explain why North Korea seeks the capability to strike the United States with a nuclear-tipped ballistic missiles. Many analysts have focused on the goal of deterrence and regime survival. Thus, they argue that North Korea’s motives are largely defensive, to prevent the United States and South Korea from mounting a regime-change operation that would bring its downfall, as happened with Libya and Iraq. But this assessment is naïve and wrong. Kim Jong-un certainly believes that nuclear weapons provide the ultimate deterrent to secure his regime. However, he also has far more aggressive intentions to disrupt the security environment, including the long-desired goal to reunify the peninsula under North Korean leadership.

Many Koreans believe that the division of the peninsula at the end of World War II was a travesty and another example of Korea being the victim of great-power rivalry. Thus, it is no surprise that the preamble of the North Korean constitution cites Kim Il-sung, North Korea’s revered founder, who “set the reunification of the country as the nation’s supreme task.” Throughout its history, North Korea regularly has touted the importance of reunification and its determination to achieve that objective. North Korean ideology and nationalism have long advocated for the lasting goal of reunification under its superior system. In Kim Jong-un’s 2018 New Year’s Address, he continued to declare that reunification was a central task, one that all Koreans must strive to achieve. Shortly after, North Korean media reported on the need to remove the obstacles to reunification, especially outside forces—a reference to the United States and its alliance with South Korea.

Kim Jong-un’s nuclear program and the ability to directly threaten the US homeland is crucial to this goal. With nuclear weapons, Kim Jong-un can drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington by decoupling the alliance. Pyongyang can work to bend South Korea to its will, using nuclear threats to force Seoul’s capitulation while making Washington reluctant to intervene for fear of a nuclear strike on the United States. Whether North Korea can succeed in this goal is another matter, but it would be foolish to assume it will not try to use nuclear weapons in a coercive manner to achieve its most important goal, reunification.

Regime Security

Prestige and domestic politics also may have been a factor in Pyongyang’s calculus, but ultimately the Kim Jong-un regime has sought nuclear weapons—and the means to deliver them—to preserve North Korea’s dynastic Communist-Stalinist system. As long as Kim or his family remains in power, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which North Korea does not see itself as having an external, existential threat from the United States and its allies.

Lessons from the recent past may bolster Kim Jong-un’s desire to maintain or expand his nuclear deterrent. For more than four decades, the regime has inculcated schoolchildren with the memory of American B-29 bombers razing major North Korean cities, towns, and dams with high explosives and napalm during the Korean War. More recently, nuclear weapons may have kept the Cold War cold by making the costs of direct US-Soviet confrontation unacceptably high. Moreover, other despots who have given up nuclear programs, such as Saddam Hussein and Muammar Qadhafi, have found themselves on the receiving end of US-sponsored regime change. Given this history, nuclear weapons are the ultimate guarantee of security because—in the regime’s view—the threat of nuclear war is the only thing deterring the US from attacking their country. Nuclear weapons join Pyongyang’s arsenal of chemical and biological weapons as a potential weapon of last resort against South Korea’s high-tech and capable conventional forces.

Pyongyang probably would target US and allied forces outside the Korean Peninsula with nuclear-armed missiles in the event of war, but only if the regime came under direct threat. There are provocations (for both sides) well short of nuclear war, but it is also noteworthy that North Korea has not committed any major military provocations since 2010. Kim Jong-un assumed power a year later when his father, Kim Jong-il, died. North Korea may also be willing to limit its nuclear weapons to a minimum deterrent force.

North Korea is unlikely to use nuclear weapons on the Korean Peninsula itself to try to force reunification because of geography and topography. One expert observed that the only targets in South Korea that would warrant the use of nuclear weapons would be countervalue, such as population centers. Due to South Korea’s mountainous terrain, nearly 75% of the country’s population lives on 30% of the landmass. Paraphrasing the Chinese master of war, Sun Tzu, it is better to take an enemy’s cities whole rather than destroying them. In the final analysis, any nuclear use by North Korea likely would provoke a US nuclear response against North Korea itself, thus ending the Kim Jong-un regime.
DEBATE #4: Will the US and ROK Maintain Alignment?

No, Discord is Likely

The dog days of the US-South Korea alliance occurred during the 2000s, when anti-Americanism in South Korea reached some of the highest levels ever. In turn, US officials were angered by what they saw as a lack of gratitude for what the United States had done over the decades to defend South Korea. After the 2006 summit between George W. Bush and South Korean president Roh Moo-hyun, one press report lamented that this is “what an alliance on the brink of divorce looks like.”

The chief reason for alliance discord during this period was disagreement over North Korea policy. The liberal Roh administration was determined to continue the economic and political engagement begun under the “Sunshine Policy” of the previous president, Kim Dae-jung. However, Bush despised the North Korean regime, including it in the administration’s “axis of evil” and remarking that “I loathe Kim Jong-il.” The hard-line policy that followed clashed with Roh’s engagement approach.

South Korea’s current president Moon Jae-in, elected after Park Geun-hye’s impeachment and removal from office, campaigned on a strategy to engage North Korea. Moon served as chief of staff in the Roh administration, and many analysts feared a “Sunshine Policy 2.0” that would run counter to Washington’s strategy of “maximum pressure” and “all options are on the table.” Moon did reach out to Pyongyang in the early days of his tenure, but North Korea responded with silence and more weapons tests. Kim Jong-un provided no opening for engagement, leaving Seoul and Washington in close alignment to turn up the pressure for denuclearization.

But times may be changing. With the Olympics and North Korea’s “charm offensive,” we may be on the cusp of a serious policy rift between Seoul and Washington. If Moon moves further in the direction of engagement following a successful North-South summit and Trump holds to “maximum pressure” despite a possible US-North Korea meeting, policy alignment on North Korea may again be a source of serious friction within the alliance. One hopes that Washington and Seoul can agree on revising the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement to remove that issue as a source of alliance friction.

It is incumbent on Seoul and Washington to maintain close collaboration lest North Korea succeed in driving a wedge into the alliance. If Seoul and Washington are no longer aligned in their North Korea policy, dark days may indeed be ahead.

Yes, the Alliance is Remarkably Robust

No alliance is immune to fracture, but the US-South Korea alliance has reserves of strength that make it remarkably robust. Some American actions could damage the relationship beyond repair—for example, the US conducting a military strike on North Korea without consulting South Korea. Nonetheless, the historical record and the balance of forces in Northeast Asia provide incentives to maintain the alliance through temporary vicissitudes.

South Korean public opinion has shown a high level of support for the United States. Anti-Americanism can flare, as it did in 2002 as a result of a bitter presidential election and the accidental deaths of two schoolgirls at American hands, but public support for the US alliance rebounded quickly. The US-ROK alliance has survived oscillations between military and civilian governments, and through South Korean governments taking both hard and soft lines toward the North. That longevity suggests a high degree of durability. To be sure, the present moment is indeed one of crisis in US-ROK relations, and the past is no guarantee of the future. Kim Jong-un has masterfully used Olympic diplomacy to take advantage of the fact that the current US president is unpopular in South Korea.

That said, the persistent approval of the US alliance grows from real South Korean interests. South Korea perceives itself as living in a dangerous neighborhood, and the US alliance provides substantial protection. Kim Jong-un’s charm offensive and tentative agreement on a summit with Trump have to date produced zero concrete results, and the goodwill generated by the 2018 Winter Olympics can only last so long. The proposed summit has real potential to end poorly. The long-term problems of Kim’s brutal regime, destabilizing behavior, and quest for nuclear weapons show no signs of going away. Even should some degree of normalization with the North take place, South Koreans continue to display a high degree of hostility and distrust toward Japan.

China shares South Korean hostility toward Japan, which might seem to open up the prospect of a grand bargain whereby the South would abandon its US alignment in return for the PRC abandoning the North. But while South Korea’s economic relations with the PRC are indeed deep, Xi Jinping’s government has shown no signs of abandoning its problematic North Korean client, and the PRC’s long-standing commitment to regional stability and its self-perceived role as benevolent hegemon in East Asia militate against such a diplomatic revolution. The South Korean military’s extensive interweaving with American command structures would also make such a transition quite difficult, and South Korean public opinion has grown increasingly resentful of the PRC’s failure to discipline Kim’s regime.
Yes, Increase the Pressure

Economic sanctions offer a pathway out of the North Korea nuclear and missile crisis. In recent years, the United States, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and other countries, as well as the European Union, have applied an array of sanctions against North Korea designed to limit the latter’s nuclear and ballistic-missile programs. Some sanctions have addressed other issues, including human rights, money laundering, and terrorism.

In 2006, following North Korea’s first test of a nuclear device, the United Nations Security Council adopted a comprehensive sanctions regime with the passage of Resolution 1718. This was followed by eight additional resolutions, all of which have sought to limit, in one form or another, North Korea’s ability to continue with its missile, nuclear, and other WMD activities.

Despite these actions, North Korea has been able to continue building and improving its nuclear and missile capabilities. This has been attributed to Pyongyang’s clever ability to use a web of front companies, criminal enterprises, and other techniques that enable it to evade many of the sanctions applied against it.

But there are two positive trends that suggest that sanctions deserve to be given a chance, given that they are most likely preferable to any military option. The first trend is the recent uptick in international resolve and the growing focus on actual sources of illicit cash. UNSC Resolution 2397 (2017), for instance, states that North Korean activities have “destabilized the region and beyond” and lists the DPRK’s trade in “sectoral goods” (coal, iron, textiles, seafood, etc.) and the “revenue generated from DPRK workers overseas” as being linked to the country’s nuclear and missile programs. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that countries around the world are finally cracking down on these various sources of revenue.

The second trend is the increasing tendency to make sanctions smarter by enhancing their “flexible enveloping” quality. This means that sanctions must be flexible enough to envelop the total perimeter of an illicit enterprise or activity. An example of this would be the 2005 designation of a Macau-based bank (Banco Delta Asia) as a “primary money laundering concern.” In that case, the US government did not necessarily need to determine the exact nature of the criminal enterprise, it simply needed to identify the bank through which the money was being processed. As North Korea’s sanctions-evading behaviors have become increasingly innovative, the sanctions applied against it must be equally creative. Therefore, sanctions—and especially smarter sanctions—should be given a chance.

No, Sanctions are Unlikely to Work

As a means of coercing North Korea to denuclearize, economic sanctions are very unlikely to be effective.

Although the UN has stated that the sanctions are “not intended to have adverse humanitarian consequences for the civilian population,” in North Korea sanctions historically have affected the average citizens rather than the elite who control the state. In general, the elite and the military are the last to feel the effects of sanctions. Unlike in a democracy, where a miserable, starving citizenry might exert pressure on the government to change its policies, in North Korea elites show little concern for the well-being of the population. Evidence of this proposition may be seen in the 1990s famine, during which millions of people starved to death yet little was done to alleviate the suffering of the population. Even under the most aggressive sanctions, North Korean leaders will continue drinking cappuccino in Pyongyang while the peasants in the countryside suffer.

Sanctions will not be effective because North Korea can easily evade them. For example, according to a 2017 UN report, China accounts for 90% of North Korean trade, providing food and energy and enabling access to the global financial system. Yet China has no incentive to enforce international sanctions against North Korea, at least not to the extent of threatening regime stability. A political collapse or military strife would create a political and humanitarian crisis in the border region. Thus, China will agree to curb imports but continue to do business with the Kim regime under the table. Indeed, trade between China and North Korea actually increased by 2.7% during a previous round of sanctions.

In theory, sanctions should sharply limit sources of funding, preventing the North Korean regime from investing in military weaponry. In practice, sanctions have had the opposite effect on the North Korean regime. Economic punishment has made North Korea more defiant and more determined, as evidenced by the increase in missile testing over the past four years. The most recent UN sanctions (if fully implemented) may push the North Koreans to the brink of economic and political collapse, creating the possibility of civil war and the destabilization of Northeast Asia.

The North Korean government believes that without the protection afforded by nuclear weapons there is little to prevent the US and its allies from swiftly destroying the regime, should they choose to do so. From a North Korean perspective, it makes no sense to trade the most effective deterrent for the marginal economic benefit of sanctions relief. Economic sanctions cannot impose a high enough cost on the regime to compel it to denuclearize.
DEBATE #6: Should US Leaders Directly Negotiate with the North Korean Leader?

No, Direct Talks Are a Gift to the DPRK

After years of Washington and Pyongyang being at loggerheads, the possibility of a US-North Korea summit meeting is back on the table. A summit would be historic—no US president has ever met with a North Korean leader. Proponents argue that a meeting would be a significant breakthrough, providing an opportunity for dialogue to help both sides better understand their counterpart’s positions, reduce tensions, and avoid the dangers of military conflict. Maybe this would be the outcome. But until North Korea demonstrates a willingness to denuclearize, a summit meeting is pointless and could actually be counterproductive, allowing Pyongyang to buy time to increase its nuclear capabilities.

An agreement to meet now or at any time in the near future is a huge gift to Kim Jong-un. North Korean leaders have long sought a meeting with a sitting US president, but it has never happened. A summit allows Kim to claim a major diplomatic achievement and portray the meeting as one of fellow nuclear-weapon states sitting down together for negotiations. Despite its horrendous human rights record, a summit would confer a degree of international legitimacy on the regime and provide a victory at home. Kim Jong-un can claim that he went toe to toe against the American imperialists and—as a result of his leadership, determination, and nuclear-weapons program—brought Washington to the negotiating table.

A summit meeting is a major concession on the part of the US and should not be granted lightly. What concessions has North Korea made in return for this gesture? Some argue it has agreed to a testing freeze of its nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles and accepted US-South Korea military exercises. However, weapons testing is already prohibited by a series of UN Security Council resolutions, and “accepting” military exercises that were going to happen regardless are far from major concessions on Pyongyang’s part.

In the end, the US has offered a major carrot for little in return and no movement toward the most important goal: denuclearization. Until North Korea provides a concrete indication of its willingness to denuclearize, summit-level talks will be little more than a public-relations spectacle that will allow Kim Jong-un to play on the international stage. A summit will have little value until lower-level officials are able to test North Korea’s willingness to denuclearize and hammer out a specific deal beforehand. Only then is it time to bring the leaders together to finalize the deal.

Yes, There is an Imperative to Talk

While one could make a compelling argument for regular meetings with any adversary to forestall the violent cataclysm of war, this step is particularly important in the case of the completely secluded and utterly mysterious country of North Korea. Little credible information exists on the goals, intellectual frameworks, and demeanors of DPRK leaders. While US leaders can rely on the intelligence apparatus for such analyses, these indirect approaches are a poor substitute for direct interaction, which can mitigate against misperception—a significant danger. Moreover, since American leaders are fully experienced in tough negotiations, this particular challenge cannot be considered arduous. On the contrary, it is the North Korean leader, quite inexperienced in summity, who should be anxious.

Arguably, the youth and inexperience of the current North Korean leader only further underlines the importance of direct negotiations. Kim Jong-un is not an aged leader simply aiming to continue the Kim dynasty, as were his father and grandfather during the 1990s. Rather, if the young leader is to perpetuate his rule for decades into the future, he may well have a notional plan to create a viable state—one that is not perpetually on the brink of war with most of its neighbors. That is not for certain, of course, but it is a possibility that must be explored. It is even conceivable that North Korean leaders actually perceive more-acute threats from either South Korea (ideology) or especially China (territory), so the US paradoxically could be viewed as the more viable partner. Most importantly, Kim Jong-un was educated in Switzerland, which gives him a window into the West that likely differentiates him substantially from other dictators in small, secluded states. That difference alone justifies the meeting as a possibility to reach an important breakthrough. Even if there is no breakthrough, such meetings are worthwhile. American leaders have in modern history met quite regularly with brutal dictators. Few foreign-policy specialists would assert that meetings with Stalin and Mao should not have taken place.

The counterarguments do not withstand scrutiny. The idea that the North Korean regime will gain enormous legitimacy is hardly credible, since that regime has shown remarkable durability already and the US has been vilified incessantly for decades. Thus, North Korean hard-liners may even view their young leader as capitulating to US pressure and any gain in legitimacy will be marginal, at best. Likewise, the chances of Washington getting “hoodwinked” are also negligible, since the issues are extremely clear, arms-control practices are readily available, and the international community is solidly behind the American president.

If negotiations fail, Washington will retain its strong military deterrent, of course, but its diplomatic position could also be substantially enhanced.
DEBATE #7: What Should Be on the Agenda for High-level US-North Korea Talks?

**EVERYTHING**

US policy calls for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea. This goal has been a precondition for high-level talks, requiring North Korea to provide a tangible demonstration of its willingness to denuclearize. Since most agree that North Korea is unlikely to give up its nuclear ambitions, this precondition has been an obstacle to restarting high-level talks with Pyongyang. Instead, the US should begin with an open agenda that includes all possible issues of concern and no preconditions. Denuclearization may be difficult to achieve, but dialogue can reach other goals short of denuclearization, establish lines of communication, and reduce tensions.

One of the proposals on the table has been a “freeze for freeze.” First suggested by China, the proposal calls on North Korea to halt further testing of missiles and nuclear weapons in exchange for the suspension of US-South Korean military exercises. Some have argued that suspending exercises is problematic; exercises are crucial to rehearsing the defense of South Korea and demonstrating the US defense commitment. Other items that could be part of negotiations for a freeze or to gain other North Korean concessions are a peace treaty, a US security guarantee, economic assistance, sanctions relief, and normalizing US-North Korea relations. The agenda can also include efforts to have Moscow and Beijing reaffirm their security commitments and provide other assurances that will convince Pyongyang it no longer needs nuclear weapons.

These incentives could be part of a phased, incremental deal that eventually leads to denuclearization or some other acceptable outcome. Trust levels between North Korea and the US are minimal and neither has much faith in the other’s willingness to follow through on any agreement. Verification protocols will also be crucial but tricky. If denuclearization is not achievable, other interim goals, including reductions in North Korea’s missile arsenal or conventional military forces, also could be explored. In short, the US should be prepared to conduct tough negotiations on a broad agenda and seek a long-term, incremental agreement with Pyongyang, in cooperation with South Korea, Japan, and China.

The outcome of any dialogue with North Korea is uncertain and US negotiators must be cautious and determined. But using military force carries great risk of starting another war and sanctions may ultimately be ineffective in coercing denuclearization. Negotiations with all issues on the table may be the best solution to promoting a peaceful and stable security environment to deal with a nuclear North Korea.

**NO, PLAY HARD BALL**

If US leaders indeed opt to negotiate with North Korea, they should not lean forward excessively in such negotiations. Indeed, a deal that is generous to North Korea would merely provoke further demands from Pyongyang and could even encourage other proliferators to leap ahead for the purpose of making similar ultimatums. From a position of unassailable military, economic, diplomatic, and moral strength, Washington can afford to drive a very hard bargain with Pyongyang.

The strength of the US position comes into focus when one realizes how quickly North Korea softened its tone and agreed to negotiate after stringent sanctions were applied in December 2017. Undoubtedly, North Korea would prefer to undertake such negotiations before its situation is completely desperate, but the handwriting was on the wall. The people of North Korea cannot “eat nuclear weapons,” and so the young leader in Pyongyang appears to have come quickly to the logical realization that an additional 2–3 years of sanctions would likely prompt regime collapse. Even if the first set of negotiations is a total failure, the same basic logic of “maximum pressure” will prompt Pyongyang to eventually return to the table.

Denuclearization should be the total focus of the talks. That process should entail complete, verifiable, and irreversible arms control. To be complete, any agreement would have to consider not just the weapons but the related laboratories and test facilities, and obviously the means of delivering such weapons. Verification should involve the full range of new technologies and take advantage of lengthy institutional experience gained by the IAEA. A long history of “stop-start-stop” negotiating with Pyongyang means that the irreversible component of the agreement must be ironclad.

Offering major “carrots,” such as alterations to the US-ROK alliance, would be foolhardy, given the essential role of deterrence. Security assurances, moreover, need not go beyond the statements that have already been made. Diplomatic relations with the US could be an incentive that is proffered once Pyongyang has made real, substantive moves toward denuclearization, such as the transparent dismantling of actual weapons. However, sanctions relief should only occur once total denuclearization has been achieved and is shown to be both robust and durable. If a meeting between US and North Korean leaders actually takes place, this is already a major concession by the US and no more indulgences need be entertained.

To accommodate North Korea’s nuclear ambitions would only invite a vast “nuclear proliferation cascade” that would represent the ultimate catastrophe for global security.
A Recipe for Disaster

The idea of a limited strike on North Korea to alter Pyongyang’s behavior is dangerous, and the proposal should be treated with great skepticism. The concept of the policy is to engage in a limited attack that would not seek to alter the military balance, but instead would send a military signal that would cause Pyongyang to scale back its military ambitions.

The limited-strike approach, sometimes called the “bloody nose” option, has considerable risks and only dubious prospects of a positive outcome. An unprecedented and, from the North’s perspective, unprovoked attack would be precisely the sort of attack that would seem to demand a response.

Why, exactly, should we expect this option to work? Why should North Korea alter its behavior immediately after a surprise attack by the United States? Would a limited strike instead only reinforce Pyongyang’s interest in weapons development? Would a limited strike inadvertently lead North Korean leaders to conclude that their nuclear deterrent was effective, and embolden them? After all, the United States would be signaling that it saw a broad, decisive military attack as an unappealing option. To a North Korean, that could sound a lot like successful deterrence.

And with a limited strike, there are numerous possible avenues to inadvertent escalation. What if Pyongyang believes a limited attack only presages a broader assault; concludes the United States now seeks to end the Kim regime; and, believing the end is near, attacks with everything it has? What if a lower-level commander takes the initiative to launch an artillery strike against Seoul, due to either misperception or patriotic rage? What reason does one have to believe that it will go right, that Pyongyang’s decades-long defiance of the international community will mend itself after a short attack by its despised enemy? The United States would have no control over North Korea’s response. In the heat of battle, even during a skirmish, opportunities for misperception and escalation are always present.

The limited-strike idea would appear to rest on two foundations that often lead to foreign-policy disaster: deep frustration with the status quo, and casual optimism that a jostling of the military game board will magically lead to a positive outcome. North Korea seems highly committed to nuclear weapons development and missile technology acquisition. A limited strike embraces grave risks while offering little reason to expect a positive outcome.

The Only Remaining Option

Short of military strikes, the US/ROK alliance has employed, singly and concurrently, many diplomatic, informational, military, and economic efforts over the years in an attempt to effect change in the DPRK. Many of these efforts have been targeted at precluding Pyongyang from possessing nuclear weapons/ICBMs. The DPRK’s surprising advances in the development of nuclear weapons/ICBMs proves that our efforts to date have failed.

The alliance’s attempts to influence the DPRK have spanned a very wide range of both carrot and “soft” stick endeavors. Carrots have included extended Six Party Talks, programs allowing ROK/DPRK families to meet, DPRK participation in the 2018 Olympics in Seoul, canceling some military exercises, and minimal response to major DPRK military actions. “Soft” stick activities have included pressure on the PRC/Russia to rein in the DPRK, information operations to influence the DPRK population, terror-labeling of the DPRK, publicizing comparisons of ROK and DPRK living standards, ratcheting up sanctions, and flying bombers over the peninsula.

If a major objective of the alliance is to preclude the DPRK from possessing operationally capable nuclear weapons/ICBMs, the time to influence that objective is short. If we are serious about stopping the DPRK nuclear weapon/ICBM programs before they are operational, our only remaining option is military action. Due to the alliance’s tepid responses to DPRK SOF incursions and the sinking of the Cheonan, DPRK leadership has probably come to think that the US/ROK alliance fears going to war so much that it precludes us from using force. If the DPRK feels the alliance’s actions are held in check by artillery within range of Seoul, possession of nuclear weapons/ICBMs will provide an exponentially more capable DPRK freedom to act however they want. Obviously there is risk in initiating limited military action; however, DPRK leadership also must know that going to war will eventually entail total regime destruction.

A limited conventional cruise-missile strike on the DPRK will show its leadership that possession of nuclear weapons/ICBMs in violation of UN resolutions crosses a US/ROK alliance redline. The strikes should clearly target nuclear weapon/ICBM capabilities and be synchronized with diplomatic and informational actions to let them know the ongoing military action is not about regime destruction. Without military action we are simply pushing the problem into the future, a near-term future that will be dramatically more dangerous because the DPRK will have operational nuclear weapons/ICBMs. Sometimes people who rule by brute force only understand the effect of brute force.

NOTE: These debates purposefully make no use of classified information, but such information is highly relevant to this particular debate and cleared readers are urged to contact NWC to seek more-detailed elaboration.
NO, BEIJING WOULD KEEP A LOW PROFILE

Since the 1980s, Chinese diplomacy has sought to keep a low profile. It frequently criticizes, but seldom punishes, Washington’s use of force to resolve international disputes. The case in question, however, would be a unilateral action against a Chinese neighbor, a neighbor only a few hundred miles away from Beijing, led by a regime whose existence is owed to the blood of a million Chinese soldiers, and a state with whom Beijing maintains a treaty relationship. Would Chinese leaders simply “look on with folded arms?”

For outside observers, it is very difficult to predict how China would react. We do not know what PRC diplomats are telling their American counterparts. But the available information suggests that Beijing probably lacks the resolve to respond forcefully to a limited U.S. strike on the DPRK. The PRC’s message is weak and contradictory. Officially, China declares that it seeks both a stable and a nonnuclear Korean Peninsula. To Beijing, the former is clearly more important than the latter. Yet Beijing has not declared any redlines. Moreover, Beijing has supported sanctions against its ally and participated in its isolation from the international community. Unofficially, PRC commentators openly express diverse views on North Korea and the nuclear issue. The lack of a “party line” suggests profound ambivalence about how best to handle its neighbor to the south. Today, only foreign invasion or regime collapse would rouse Beijing to consider military operations on Pyongyang’s behalf.

Beijing’s options are further constrained by the inherent limits of great-power conflict in the nuclear age. Assuming any U.S. strike does not lead to war on the peninsula, the PRC would be faced with a fait accompli. National honor would compel the PRC to respond with more than words; statements, speeches, and op-eds would not be enough. China would likely express its anger through military operations to “show force.” This could take the form of large military exercises in the Yellow Sea; other robust actions might include unsafe intercepts of US aircraft, harassment of US naval vessels operating in Chinese jurisdictional waters, weapons testing, or other provocative forms of “saber rattling.” These actions could be accompanied by informal embargoes of strategically important resources (e.g., rare earths) and other geoeconomic tools, which have become Beijing’s preferred approach to punishing other states. Ultimately, however, the stakes of a limited American action against the DPRK would not be high enough for Beijing to risk an armed conflict with the only state powerful enough to jeopardize what remains the chief preoccupation of Chinese grand strategy: national rejuvenation.

YES, IT HAPPENED ONCE, IT CAN HAPPEN AGAIN

China is no longer a weak military power, as it was in 1950 when many of its “volunteers” crossing the Yalu did not even have proper footwear. Today, China’s land forces are practically without peer in size and kit, including advanced tanks, attack helicopters, air-defense systems, and mobile artillery systems. These forces drill intensively in winter warfare and in mountainous terrain. They would be joined by ample air and naval capabilities, which give Beijing additional military options, for example airborne, amphibious, and special operations insertion. A Chinese military intervention might indeed retain elements of ambiguity. Beijing could opt to mine the entrance to the Yellow Sea, create no-go enclaves or buffer zones, or even transfer sensitive targeting data to Pyongyang, while still avoiding all-out war.

Despite a younger generation that is less inclined to favor support for Pyongyang, the historical factor will continue to be significant in Chinese calculations. Few Americans are aware that China did intervene in force in Korea quite successfully in the Imjin War (1592–98). Said to be a close student of history, President Xi Jinping gave a speech on the 60th anniversary of the Korean War, arguing that the Chinese “victory … placed the plans of the imperialists in disarray.” Some insight into how the PLA leadership views this matter is a comment by General Luo Yuan on the origins of the Korean War: “[I]f the Soviet Union had invaded Mexico, it would have been just five seconds before the U.S. dispatched troops.”

It is not surprising that Xi’s special emissary to Pyongyang in November 2017, Song Tao, visited a graveyard of Chinese soldiers in North Korea; this likely was intended to symbolize that the 1961 China-North Korea “Mutual Aid” treaty remains in force. Indeed, an August 2017 statement in the Chinese press indicated that China will defend North Korea if it is attacked. Moreover, the March 2018 Xi-Kim surprise summit seems to have underlined this point.

China will employ its military in a conflict to prevent either chaos on its border or collapse of the Kim regime. The policies of the US and its allies over the last several years (e.g., the “rebalance”) have done little to allay Beijing’s concerns that Washington and its allies are using the threat of North Korea to “contain China.” China’s bellicose reaction in a military crisis could well reflect the growing “zero-sum” mentality that is gaining adherents in Beijing.

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DEBATE #10: Does DPRK Have an ICBM Capability?

**NO, MAJOR Hurdles Remain**

Most analysts would agree that North Korea is making serious progress on its nuclear capabilities—and probably much quicker than anyone expected. However, despite this surprising pace of development, it is important to note that Pyongyang has yet to clear some significant technological hurdles. Although North Korea now appears to have a large enough multistage rocket with the range to hit any target in the US, along with a small number of nuclear weapons, it is less clear whether they have made similar advances in other technologically challenging areas. Pyongyang has yet to demonstrate an end-to-end test to validate its ability to pull the entire system together, from the boost phase to stage separation, warhead separation, reentry, warhead arming, and finally detonation. These highly complex systems must work together within unforgiving tolerances to avoid complete failure.

Additionally, it does not appear that North Korea possesses a missile test range of sufficient length with the resources needed to analyze critical data. As a result, North Korea has routinely used what is known as “lofted trajectories” to try to replicate missile flights at intercontinental ranges. They accomplish this by launching on steep trajectories, allowing missile stages to burn longer to simulate longer distances. This does allow for analysis on missile-stage performance, but is not particularly helpful for analyzing reentry vehicle performance. “Lofted” tests subject the reentry vehicle to significant amounts of heat, but for a much shorter period than a full-range test because the reentry vehicle passes through the atmosphere at a much steeper angle. Full-range tests more realistically replicate a missile launched on an intercontinental trajectory and subject the reentry vehicle to the harsh environment of reentry for a much longer period than a lofted test. To date, North Korean ICBM test launches have either contained very small payloads or have not survived reentry. Thus, North Korean scientists will undoubtedly want to test more—but more testing brings more pressure from the international community, making significant developmental gains difficult to achieve.

Even with help from other states, developing a capable and credible nuclear weapons capability is neither easy nor quick. Kim Jong-un has an intensely personal interest in nuclear weapons and no doubt has placed enormous expectations on his scientists. While this may provide some impressive short-term gains, excessive pressure can wreak havoc with the development process. Failures are quite common and require patience—something that Kim Jong-un does not seem to have.

**Perhaps Yes**

U.S. policy is to deny North Korea the means to strike the US with nuclear weapons, but in all likelihood the DPRK already has or will imminently have a credible, if not 100% certain, ability to do so.

In 2017, North Korea demonstrated ICBM-class missiles—the HS-15 and HS-14—and a boosted or staged nuclear device of ~200 kilotons. Pyongyang has ICBM building blocks, and the size of the HS-15 (midway between the Minuteman III and Titan II), plus thermonuclear technology, makes it almost certain they could produce a deliverable weapon.

The major step not yet demonstrated is a survivable reentry vehicle (RV), but that is not likely a long-term roadblock. DPRK test RVs seen to date resemble US Mk 4, 5, and 6 RVs, circa 1960. Those RVs were blunt, meaning lower accuracy, but also much easier thermal requirements; that generation also lacked altitude control or spin-up motors. Primitive by today’s standards, they nonetheless worked. Even without “help” or espionage, technical information on entry aerodynamics, ablative materials, and other parameters is declassified or open-source. Recent tests may have suffered RV failures, but their lofted trajectories created peak heating and acceleration rates twice that of full-range flights. HS-15 gives the DPRK significantly increased weight and volume limits, potentially providing a margin to overdesign RV thermal protection.

Lately, North Korean progress across the board has been faster than anticipated. This represents, in uncertain proportions, prioritization of resources, greater skill and efficiency in the DPRK research establishment, espionage, or active assistance, but whatever the mix there is no compelling reason to predict that progress will falter in the near term.

The bottom line is that a minimal ICBM capability, to deliver a basic fission device to the US West Coast, requires little more than what the DPRK has already demonstrated. Dropping a 100+ kiloton warhead anywhere in CONUS requires somewhat more ability, but both civilian missile scientists who follow North Korea and, more importantly, the CIA and NASIC all concluded in 2017 that the DPRK’s ICBM capability was already credible, though not at 100% certainty.

DPRK missiles probably lack the safety and performance qualities and extreme reliability of American systems—but they don’t need to. A 50%—even a 10%—likelihood of successfully devastating an American city drastically changes strategic calculations for the US and for Kim Jong-un. The window to strike North Korea without grave risk to the US homeland is closed.

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DEBASE #11: Could a Naval Embargo Be Effective in Pressuring the DPRK?

**YES, GIVE SANCTIONS SOME “BITE”**

This action is the next logical military rung on the power-escalation ladder. Its purpose is not to directly compel denuclearization but to further exert international will sufficient to bring North Korea to the bargaining table. Over the past two years, seven UN Security Council resolutions have imposed sanctions that are increasingly comprehensive in constraining the means by which North Korea funds its nuclear program. However, although these sanctions are still gaining traction, they do not have the same power and “bite” as a naval embargo for monitoring and enforcement. The latest sanctions received unanimous approval of the Security Council, including Chinese and Russian support.

A naval embargo task force could be established that finessed Chinese and Russian participation to back up their votes and significantly offset illegal maritime trade. The composition of an effective embargo task force should not be solely, or even largely, US in character. An unorthodox coalition of Chinese and Russian AGIs and China Coast Guard vessels alongside US and Japanese Coast Guard vessels is feasible, with South Korean, Japanese, and Australian small combatants, alongside US and other UNSC member nations. The US contribution could comprise a surface warfare–configured Littoral Combat Ship, platforms such as the T-EPF high-speed vessel, and Mk VI riverine forces. This would lower the demand signal and the risk of consuming the readiness and capacity of Yokosuka-based surface combatants. Submarines, tactical unmanned and manned aerial-reconnaissance systems, and Japan-based F-35Bs would add to the package.

This would not necessarily have to be a close embargo, and could allow for other international partners to enforce it from closer to their national shores. Even in the case of a close embargo, North Korea has a very limited number of seaborne ports and the entrances to many of its river ports are restricted. This would enable naval task groups to enforce the embargo smartly and with sufficient standoff from coastal threats.

**NO, IT SIMPLY WILL BE TOO POROUS**

A consensus of the NWC faculty polled believes that any economic crisis that sanctions cause for the DPRK regime will continue to be manageable. A naval embargo would be impractical, but even if it were not such a measure would be unlikely to increase the pressure on North Korea significantly.

To implement an embargo, substantial forces would be required to monitor traffic to and from DPRK ports, board ships, and inspect cargoes. Significant force protection would be necessary to guard against possible North Korean countermeasures. Since these forces are not readily available, other worldwide commitments would have to give way.

Even if sufficient forces were available, few nations trade with North Korea. As of 2016, China provided more than 90% of its imports and accepted over 85% of its exports. The majority of this trade is legitimate, and much of it is carried in Chinese-flagged hulls. Since the PRC would not allow allied forces to board and inspect its merchant vessels, most ships trading with North Korea would be effectively exempt from an embargo.

The remaining North Korean maritime trade is already under the microscope. Due to UN sanctions, the risk of inspection and seizure is high in foreign ports. Ships carrying illicit cargo must make their voyages without refueling, and the few nations willing to entertain such trade are not neighbors.

In the past two decades, there have been instances of possible or actual sanctions violations in the maritime domain, involving trade with Yemen, Myanmar, and Cuba. The Spanish navy stopped M/V So San in 2002, but allowed it to proceed to Yemen with its cargo of legitimately purchased SCUD missiles. M/V Light, possibly carrying weapons, was shadowed by the US Navy in 2011 but not stopped or boarded. Instead, diplomatic pressure on Myanmar forced the ship to return to North Korea without unloading. In 2013, Panamanian authorities boarded M/V Chon Chong Gang as it transited the Panama Canal. Obsolete Cuban weapons were found under a cargo of sugar and were seized. None of these interdiction efforts produced significant results, but they underscored commitment to UN sanctions.

Sanctions enforcement through diplomatic, economic, and legal channels has made illicit bulk trade very difficult for the DPRK regime. Maritime forces can continue to play a supporting role by addressing occasional violators on the high seas. However, even if the necessary forces were readily available, a naval embargo would be unlikely to significantly increase pressure on North Korea.
No, DPRK Naval Forces Are Not a Threat

North Korean forces will not pose a serious threat to the USN. Badly outclassed in every category, they would struggle to survive during a conflict. Most significantly, DPRK air defenses are wholly inadequate. Port infrastructure, antiship missile sites, command and control facilities, and units in port will suffer badly from allied strikes. Control of DPRK naval forces will swiftly degrade. While numbers, stealth, and weather will allow some to complete their missions, overall they will operate at a grave disadvantage versus allied air and maritime forces. Damaged infrastructure will make it difficult to replenish and repair those units fortunate enough to survive their initial missions and return to port.

Submarines are North Korea’s most potent platforms, but they still will fight at a severe disadvantage. The sinking of the South Korean corvette Cheonan notwithstanding, attacks on alert, modern surface forces will prove much more difficult. Aware of their limitations, DPRK subs will focus instead on mine-laying and special operations missions. Provided they sortie successfully, some are likely to complete their missions. Mines may inflict limited attrition and complicate the flow of forces to theater, but these weapons have low prospects of materially changing the course of the conflict.

Shore-based antiship missiles do represent an initial threat to allied ships, but air and maritime strikes will inflict significant attrition. Even when such missiles are fully operational, their targeting effectiveness will be limited by the DPRK’s inadequate ISR capabilities. And even in the event of successful targeting, allied defensive systems will prove difficult for obsolete DPRK missiles to defeat.

The DPRK’s surface fleet is designed for coastal defense and its units might inflict damage in unexpected, close-range engagements, especially near shore. But with few and obsolete antiship missiles, poor air defenses, and almost nonexistent antisubmarine capabilities, the fleet is ill-equipped to take on a modern navy in open conflict. Many small surface craft are dedicated to infiltration missions. As with submarines, some of these vessels, if allowed to sortie in large numbers, will evade allied efforts to stop them.

The North Korean navy is essentially a disposable force, and time is not on its side. Small-scale modernization efforts will not change this. Absent third-party intervention or some sort of technological breakthrough that radically levels the playing field, its best prospects are early in a conflict when the chances of surprise are greater. Once hostilities commence, superior allied air and maritime forces will steadily erode the limited threat it poses.

Yes, Littoral Warfare Is Hazardous

Imagine that in mid-February 2029 a US battle group led by USS Ronald Reagan takes position in the Sea of Japan off the coast of North Korea. The President orders the battle group to take actions to demonstrate US resolve during an escalating crisis.

However, by that time the DPRK may well have developed a credible threat to the US Navy, not in sea-control combat but in littoral warfare. Over the preceding decade, North Korea worked assiduously to perfect the requisite queuing and warhead-guidance technology for an antiship ballistic missile (ASBM), copying China’s steps in this area. It is very possible that, if the crisis turned into a war, Reagan would be lost to ASBM attacks and the DPRK would have defeated a challenge by the US Navy. That scenario may seem somewhat fanciful even a decade hence, but already in 2017 Pyongyang claimed it had an ASBM capability.

And ASBM capabilities are far from the only threat the DPRK might present to the US Navy. With 70 submarines of various types, the likelihood that a dozen of these vessels would avoid initial attacks on bases and sortie into likely USN operating areas is reasonably high. As the Falklands War demonstrates, antisubmarine warfare is extremely difficult in practice, so there is a high likelihood the USN would suffer ship losses to North Korean torpedo attacks.

Yet another North Korean submarine threat must also be addressed. This concerns the developing DPRK submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) that would carry a nuclear weapon. It’s not necessary to have a flotilla-sized SSBN force to cause concern; two or three SSBS with two tubes each would be sufficient to cause significant damage if the DPRK shoots first. The North Korean navy would be following a relatively well-worn route of diesel submarines that carry nuclear weapons (e.g., Israel’s). All manner of deception techniques, such as cave basing, could be employed to get these boats out to sea. They could form a major threat to Japan and possibly even US targets in the central Pacific. Perhaps most critically, these North Korean “boomers” could tie down a significant force of various key USN assets, which would be required to be constantly on guard.

Finally, one of Pyongyang’s most formidable weapons would be sea mines, which were used to devastating effect back in 1950. Mines have significantly disrupted US military operations in the recent past, and the Littoral Combat Ship is unproven in the role of mine countermeasures. Yes, the US has maritime superiority. But that does not mean the US Navy would be invulnerable in a coastal engagement.

NOTE: These debates purposefully make no use of classified information, but such information is highly relevant to this particular debate and cleared readers are urged to contact NWC to seek more-detailed elaboration.
The ongoing crisis on the Korean Peninsula presents one of the gravest threats to international security in the world today. It is not simply the obvious risk of nuclear detonations and large-scale warfare, but also that nonproliferation norms are under severe strain and the foundations of the security order in the Asia-Pacific—one of the world’s most economically dynamic regions—have been shaken. The Naval War College faculty has a unique ability to make assessments of contemporary political-military crises precisely because this group comprises regional experts and theorists of nuclear strategy, as well as military practitioners. In encompassing all the strengths of academia, the policy world, and the military domain, this particular academic institution is relatively unique.

In such a confusing and multidimensional crisis, it may be significant that NWC faculty members reached a consensus on numerous key issues. They generally agreed that Pyongyang’s primary motive for pursuing nuclear weapons is regime survival, and moreover that Washington and Seoul can rely, to a large extent, on deterrence to prevent the outbreak of major war. On a related point, it is important that a majority of NWC faculty participants in the seminar believe the most important US priority on the Korean Peninsula is to “avoid catastrophic war.” In the event of a US-DPRK conflict, NWC faculty participants generally believed it quite likely that a US-China military conflict would also result. They were quite perturbed by the prospect of a “bloody nose” strike against the DPRK, noting that it would likely spark a wider war, yet would not likely facilitate denuclearization.

Still, the NWC faculty participants in the seminar were rather divided on many issues as well, and these may perhaps be described as “known unknowns.” Faculty disagreed about how strongly to prioritize denuclearization. Even if that goal were prioritized, there was significant disagreement about how it could be achieved. The group of faculty was also rather divided concerning the extent of DPRK progress in building a credible ICBM capability. Moreover, there was considerable uncertainty regarding the extent to which the USN and USMC could provide decisive capabilities in a Korean scenario. Although the 12 debates in this report do, in part, reflect divisions of thought among the faculty participants, the faculty felt compelled to debate certain issues because there is disagreement within the wider community of specialists.

Whether the North Korea nuclear crisis is resolved by negotiation or force or remains in a tense stalemate, the deliberations and debates of NWC faculty experts outlined in this comprehensive report will be highly relevant.
Sense of the Faculty:  Selected Faculty Participants

Prof. Brad Alaniz (Commander, USN) teaches in the Joint Military Operations Department and has completed five operational tours in Japan, including a tour on the Seventh Fleet Staff. Ashore, his tours included a three-year tour as the Operations Branch Chief for Ballistic Missile Defense at U.S. Strategic Command.

Prof. Will Bundy, PhD (Captain USN, Ret.), conducts NWC research and advises on naval warfare operations. During his Navy career, he deployed to the Western Pacific, including operations in and around Korea, Japan, and the China seas.

Prof. David Burbach, PhD, earned his doctorate in political science from MIT and has a background in international security, nuclear strategy and arms control, and Soviet/post-Soviet studies.

Prof. Roger Fountain (USAF, Ret.) is in the Joint Military Operations Department. He spent numerous deployments in the Republic of Korea.

Prof. Bill Glenney is in the NWC Institute for Future Warfare Studies and has spent the past 19 years studying future maritime warfare and strategy, including in the Western Pacific.

Prof. Isaac Kardon, PhD, is a core member of the China Maritime Studies Institute. His research focuses on Chinese foreign policy, Northeast Asia security, and law of the sea issues in Asia.

Prof. Jim Kitzmiller (Captain, USN) is a military faculty member in the Strategy and Policy Department. He has over six years of experience on the Korean Peninsula, at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

Prof. Steve Kornatz (Captain USN, Ret.) has expertise in Operational Level of War Command & Control and Planning. He spent most of his 30-year career operating in the Pacific region, including a tour on the staff of Commander, Pacific Fleet.

Prof. Ryan Martinson is a researcher in the China Maritime Studies Institute.

Prof. Darren McClurg (Commander, USN) teaches in the College of Leadership and Ethics. He has extensive experience with naval operations in the Korean theater, and most recently served as future operations officer on the 7th Fleet Staff, from 2014 to 2017.

Prof. Montgomery McFate, PhD, has a doctorate in anthropology from Yale University and a JD from Harvard Law School. She worked on North Korean culture and society topics while at RAND and published some of her unclassified results in the American Intelligence Journal.

Prof. Richard A. Moss, PhD, is a faculty affiliate in the Russian Maritime Studies Institute at the Naval War College’s Center for Naval Warfare Studies. He specializes in diplomatic history and the Cold War.

Prof. Negeen Pegahi, PhD is director of the Mahan Scholars advanced research program. Her work focuses on the causes and consequences of nuclear acquisition by conventionally weak, revisionist state.

Prof. Paul Schmitt (Captain USN, Ret.) teaches and conducts research on the character of future warfare in the Pacific as part of the Halsey Alfa Advanced Research Project, and is an affiliate to both NWC’s China and Russia Maritime Studies institutes. He has expertise in operations research and analysis, which has included wargaming Northeast Asia crisis and conflict scenarios since 1995.

Prof. Paul J. Smith, PhD, is in the National Security Affairs Department at the Naval War College. His research focuses on the international politics of East Asia, including China-North Korea relations.

Prof. Andrew L. Stigler, PhD, has done research on coercive military strategies and limited-strike options. He is currently investigating how states can and cannot target an enemy’s willingness to resist demands with air power.

Prof. David Stone, PhD, teaches in the Strategy and Policy Department at NWC, and in July 2018 will become department chair. He specializes in Russian/Soviet military history and foreign policy.

Prof. Dana Struckman (Colonel USAF, Ret.) has extensive operational experience in nuclear weapons and associated delivery systems and has been analyzing North Korean and Chinese nuclear capabilities for the past 15 years.

Prof. Andrew Wilson, PhD, is a Chinese historian by training and currently serves as the John A. van Beuren Chair of Asia-Pacific Studies. Recently he has been looking into how the past six hundred years of Asian maritime history informs current security practice in the region.

Project Coordinators and Contact Information

Prof. Terence Roehrig, PhD, does most of his research on Korean politics and security, along with nuclear weapons and deterrence theory. He has written on North Korean nuclear weapons and strategy and the US nuclear umbrella.

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Prof. Lyle Goldstein, PhD, was the founding director of the China Maritime Studies Institute (CMSI) and also has expertise on Russia. Over the last five years, he has been exploring Chinese and Russian policies with respect to North Korea.

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