

Don't go ballistic! The least bad agenda after North Korea's ICBM test by David Santoro

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On July 4, the day the United States celebrated its independence, North Korea tested an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), that is, a missile capable of striking the US homeland. This is highly symbolic and will drive many in Washington to demand drastic measures in response, including preemptive strikes, even as experts debate whether this missile technology can land on US soil. In recent weeks, influential politicians, notably Senators [John McCain](#) and [Lindsay Graham](#), have urged the Trump administration to consider such strikes if Pyongyang crossed that threshold because they, like [many US policymakers](#), have for years regarded it a “strategic game-changer.”

Launching military strikes against North Korea, however, would almost certainly be unsuccessful in eliminating its arsenal and, more importantly, would lead to a disastrous conflict that could escalate to nuclear war. Yes, North Korea's nuclear and missile progress is worrisome and requires action, but beating the drums of war does not make sense right now. Yesterday's North Korean ICBM test is not, and should not be viewed as, a strategic game-changer. This is both an inaccurate and counterproductive characterization.

It is inaccurate because the United States has existed with adversaries capable of striking its homeland with nuclear-tipped missiles since the late 1950s. It was exactly 60 years ago, in 1957, that the Soviet Union made its first ICBM test, *Sputnik 1*, giving Moscow nascent capability to strike the United States. Since then, Washington has lived under the threat of nuclear strikes: first from the Soviet Union and, after the Cold War, from Russia and China. During that time, Washington has learnt that it can effectively deter and defend against such adversaries and competitors to protect itself and its interests, as well as those of its allies.

There is no reason to think that deterring and defending against a North Korea armed with nuclear-tipped ICBMs can't work, especially given that the Soviet Union, Russia, and China all had/have much more lethal nuclear arsenals than Pyongyang. Some counter that North Korea is different because Kim Jong-un, its young leader, is either irrational or not disposed to appreciate the subtleties and cautiousness that make deterrence work. Yet the record shows that Kim is neither irrational nor suicidal; he is a provocative yet also a careful and calculating actor. In short, he can be—and has been—deterred from using his arsenal.

Treating North Korea's ICBM test as a game-changer is also counterproductive, for three reasons. First, that characterization suggests to Pyongyang that it is capable of deterring the United States. Kim Jong-un may conclude that he can now engage in greater adventurism against his neighbors because the threat of his new missiles will prevent US retaliation or, at the very least, make Washington pause. This would be a serious miscalculation: the United States will not be deterred by North Korea's emerging ICBM capability.

Second, the rhetoric of strategic game-changer suggests to Pyongyang that anything short of ICBM development is de facto acceptable, or “more” acceptable. This isn't true. The United States is concerned by other North Korean military developments, including shorter-range missiles that can strike either US forces deployed in the region or US allies, South Korea and Japan. Kim Jong-un must understand that developing ICBM technology is only one more item on the increasingly long list of grievances that Washington has with him. Kim must not be given the impression that he could get a free pass on his other military developments.

Third, it is counterproductive to regard North Korea's ICBM test as a game-changer because it suggests to regional allies, South Korea and Japan, that Washington only worries about North Korea when the US homeland is threatened. At a recent [Pacific Forum CSIS event](#) featuring a tabletop exercise about a crisis on the Korean Peninsula (which involved a North Korean ICBM), South Korean and Japanese participants voiced precisely that concern. Yet by and large, despite some [unfortunate statements](#) by President Trump and a few others, the United States continues to believe that it benefits considerably from extending and, if it becomes necessary, honoring security guarantees to its allies whether its homeland is or isn't at stake. Suggestions to the contrary feed allies' growing fears that North Korea can decouple them from the United States.

How, then, should Washington respond to North Korea's ICBM test? The Trump administration's response should be threefold. First, US officials should review and adapt deterrence and defense capabilities and concepts to ensure that they are adequate to address the threats posed by an increasingly sophisticated North Korean nuclear arsenal. For instance, a small yet growing number of people, including in [South Korea](#) and increasingly [Japan](#), are calling for the forward deployment of US tactical nuclear weapons (TNW) to the Korean Peninsula. Is more tailoring of US nuclear posture necessary and useful to tackle the North Korea problem? If so, is TNW forward-deployment the best way to do so? What are the alternatives? These questions should keep US officials busy as they draft the next US Nuclear Posture Review, due out later this year or in early 2018.

More immediately, Washington should enhance military consultations and exercises with South Korea and Japan, and seek to strengthen cooperation between them. The three allies must work closely together because they would all be involved in a military contingency with Pyongyang. Trilateral security cooperation [has improved](#), but it is still limited because of [thorny political differences](#) between Seoul and Tokyo. The Trump administration should use North Korea's ICBM test to build stronger US-South Korea-Japan security cooperation.

Second, the Trump administration should double-down on efforts to strengthen sanctions against North Korea and it should rally as many states as possible to support them. The administration, to its credit, has already made significant efforts in that direction. It should now use North Korea's ICBM test to ramp them up. Sanctions are no silver bullet, but in their current form they can still be strengthened considerably, which would help tighten the screws on Pyongyang. Some (read: China) will remain reluctant to implement them thoroughly and comprehensively. Washington, however, wouldn't lose anything by pressuring them to do so.

Third, as it reinforces sanctions on Pyongyang, the Trump administration should pursue dialogue with Kim Jong-un to conclude confidence-building measures and some constraint on its arsenal. Because North Korea is now almost a de facto nuclear-armed state (a status it [has enshrined in its constitution](#)), setting denuclearization as an initial goal would be—has been—a non-starter. Pyongyang has said just that: denuclearization is [off the table](#). It is not impossible, however, to envision a cap, a freeze, or some limits on Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal until denuclearization is possible. This would not be insignificant: it would not only help reduce nuclear dangers *right now*, but also (re-)create a negotiating platform with North Korea, which has been inexistent since 2008.

Dialogue need not legitimize North Korea as nuclear-armed state. Nor should it, because Pyongyang has developed its arsenal in overt defiance of nonproliferation rules and norms. Rather, it would acquiesce to the reality of the North Korean nuclear arsenal and recognize the urgent need to constrain it. This is more likely to produce results than a denuclearization-first strategy.

If the Korean Peninsula is “the land of bad options,” this agenda is the least bad one. Many will dismiss it, arguing that it proposes nothing new. They will add that, if the past is any guide, dialogue with Pyongyang is unlikely to bear fruit. Success is far from guaranteed, but critics would be wrong to conclude that there is more to gain by attempting to cut the Gordian knot of North Korea's nuclear and missile developments with military action. There may come a time when military action becomes necessary; after outright aggression, for instance. We are not there yet.

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