



## **Tough Challenges, Hard Choices: Dealing with North Korea after the Collapse of the Leap Day Agreement**

by Evans Revere

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The “Leap Day agreement” – the well-intentioned diplomatic effort by the Obama administration to freeze North Korea’s nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs – collapsed just days after it was announced when Pyongyang conducted a rocket launch that violated both the deal with Washington and two UN Security Council resolutions. As a result, dealing with North Korea’s many challenges just got a lot harder.

As US policymakers mull how to deal with North Korea, here’s what they face:

- A damaged negotiating process that has increased mistrust of North Korea’s intentions and left the United States no closer to halting Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile programs.
- Clear signs that Pyongyang has no intention of giving up its nuclear weapons.
- A North Korean leadership that may believe it can retain its nuclear weapons and missile capabilities and improve ties with the United States.
- The absence of any constraints on Pyongyang’s ability to improve and perfect its nuclear weapons and long-range missile delivery systems, and the possibility that the North will be able to strike the continental United States in 4-5 years’ time.
- The North’s ability to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons using a virtually undetectable uranium enrichment program.
- A dangerous escalation in North-South tensions and an ominous surge in North Korean threats against the ROK.
- The potential for Pyongyang to engage again in nuclear proliferation.

- North Korea’s growing isolation, vulnerability, and dependence on China as its sole guarantor and protector.

So what can be done? The challenges posed by Pyongyang, together with the possibility that the regime may be entering a period of vulnerability, argue for a multifaceted approach that enhances US reliance on containment, deterrence, and pressure, while leaving the door open to dialogue with the North under the right circumstances. The central focus of US policy toward North Korea must be to deal with the regime’s real and growing threat rather than rely on wishful thinking about Pyongyang’s intentions.

The growing potential of the North’s nuclear and missile programs suggests that the window for strong action by the United States to contain these threats will be the next four to five years. There is also a near-term need to deter the possibility of military provocation against our South Korean ally. And the threat of North Korean proliferation requires continuing efforts by the United States, its allies and partners, and the international community.

If the response to the North’s challenges is strong and clear, the United States may be able to convince North Korea’s leaders that the path they are on is not sustainable. Ignoring the rising challenge of North Korea or waiting in the hope that Pyongyang will change on its own are not acceptable options.

### **Tools for a New Approach**

The instruments available to the United States to implement such a policy approach are considerable:

- The United States should increase the frequency and size of its unilateral, bilateral (with South Korea) and multilateral (with Japan) military exercises on and around the Korean Peninsula.
- The US should deploy new military assets in the region to deal with North Korea. These might include missile defense-related systems or offensive systems and capabilities designed to complicate the DPRK’s tactical and strategic choices.
- Washington should agree to revise the US-ROK missile agreement to extend the range of South Korean ballistic missiles, thus enabling the ROK to strike any target in the North from any location in the South.
- Washington and Seoul should make even clearer their determination to respond to future DPRK military provocations to remove any doubts that Pyongyang may have about this.
- The United States, the ROK, and other US allies and partners in the region should enhance Proliferation

Security Initiative (PSI)-related cooperation designed to deal with the possibility of North Korean proliferation. Consideration should be given to developing a regional protocol for interdicting North Korean ships suspected of engaging in proliferation and inspecting ships of other countries that have called in North Korean ports.

- Washington should work with allies and partners to increase scrutiny of North Korea's international banking transactions, with a particular focus on North Korean government-, party-, and military-connected entities that may be engaged in illicit activities or arms transfers.

### **Don't Forget Diplomacy**

The United States should leave the door open to dialogue with the DPRK. Making clear that we remain willing to engage North Korea can strengthen a more assertive US approach.

However, the experience of the Leap Day accord reminds us that renewed dialogue must be based on Pyongyang's willingness to take concrete steps to change its behavior. And if dialogue resumes, it will be important for the United States to review whether the structure of US-DPRK talks must be changed to maximize prospects for progress.

The United States should also remind the DPRK that the benefits Pyongyang could obtain through renewed talks – food and other assistance, an improvement in the lives of the North Korean people, an end to hostility, security guarantees, normalized diplomatic and economic ties, membership in international financial institutions, etc. – are still on offer if the North is prepared to change its approach to relations with the United States and the international community.

To date, none of these benefits (nor all of them taken together) has been sufficient to convince Pyongyang to give up its pursuit of nuclear weapons. However, if the North is indeed becoming more vulnerable, and if the United States is prepared to press the North even harder than it has in the past, the DPRK may come to know the futility of the path it is on.

### **Risks and Complications**

A policy approach that relies on containment, deterrence, and pressure, even one that leaves the door open to dialogue, is not without risks. A robust set of defensive measures taken by the United States and its regional allies could be misread by Pyongyang as a precursor to an offensive approach. North Korea could respond with military steps of its own.

North Korea could respond strongly to enhanced PSI activities. Pyongyang could also react badly to measures taken against its firms or banking institutions.

One lesson the United States has learned over the years is the danger of making threats against Pyongyang that we are not prepared to follow through on. We have also learned that a red line that is not enforced damages US credibility.

A more vigorous US approach to dealing with North Korea will require even greater coordination and cooperation between the United States and its regional allies. The United

States will also need to enhance engagement with China to ensure that military steps taken to deal with Pyongyang are not misperceived as being directed against the PRC.

There is also the risk that the approach suggested above could increase North Korea's reliance on China. Perhaps, but it would also spotlight China's role as the sole guarantor of the DPRK's survival, a development that could increase calls by the international community for Beijing to use its influence to change North Korea's behavior.

Finally, the United States should be mindful that steps designed to maximize pressure on North Korea and shape its choices could also lead to the destabilization of the regime if, as has been argued, the North is entering a period of vulnerability. The collapse of the North Korean regime has not been the policy of the United States, but it could be an unintended consequence of a more robust approach.

This underscores the need for even closer coordination with our South Korean and Japanese partners and for a serious discussion of future peninsular contingencies. China should be part of such discussions, but it has been reluctant to engage in any official dialogue that touches on the possibility of the DPRK's collapse. It is time for Beijing to reassess the wisdom of that reluctance.

The United States has been contending with the challenge posed by North Korea's nuclear program for almost two decades. Today, we are no closer to the goal of convincing the North to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Indeed, that goal now appears unattainable. There is little near-term prospect for renewed talks with North Korea and slim hope that such talks would yield the results the United States and others have sought.

Nevertheless, and despite this bitter reality, as long as there is some chance that the leadership in Pyongyang can be convinced to give up its ambition to develop a deliverable nuclear warhead, it would be unwise to close the door completely on diplomacy and dialogue.

In the meantime, however, the nature of the North Korean nuclear and missile threat is changing. Any US administration would be irresponsible not to develop new measures to defend the United States, its interests, and its allies from the threat that North Korea will pose in the not-so-distant future. The time to begin doing so is now.

*PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.*