



Dealing with the DPRK: exploring the Trump administration's options by Ralph A. Cossa

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One of the major challenges for the incoming Trump administration will be the growing nuclear weapons capability of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK or North Korea). Pyongyang has made it clear that it will not even begin to discuss denuclearization until and unless Washington agrees to a bilateral peace treaty, which DPRK interlocutors insist must include an end to the ROK-US alliance and a withdrawal of US forces from, and its nuclear umbrella over, the Korean Peninsula. Washington has steadfastly (and rightly) refused this condition, insisting that normalization of relations and Pyongyang's acceptance into the community of nations requires denuclearization.

Pyongyang, under its "byungjin" or "simultaneous pursuit" policy, has proclaimed the dual goals of economic development and nuclear weapons. The US – indeed the international community, including the DPRK's primary benefactor, China – has said the North can't have both. UN Security Council sanctions aim, in part, at leading Pyongyang to make the right choice. As US Deputy Secretary of State Anthony "Tony" Blinken observed, Washington is "working every single day to build a comprehensive and sustained pressure campaign on North Korea. *Not to bring Kim Jong-un to his knees, but to bring him to his senses* [emphasis added] and back to the table to engage meaningfully on denuclearization." But US Director of National Intelligence James Clapper recently opined what most Korea watchers have believed for years: "the notion of getting the North Koreans to denuclearize is probably a lost cause." So where does this leave soon-to-be President Trump?

While an incoming administration may wish to put the North Korean challenge on a back-burner, Pyongyang has a habit of forcing the issue; recall it greeted the incoming Obama administration with a long-range missile test, followed by a nuclear weapon test. Pyongyang doesn't mind being despised, but it hates being ignored; some test of the new administration's mettle should be anticipated.

The Korean Peninsula has been called the "land of bad options." If there was a simple or easy solution to the North Korea nuclear weapons challenge it would have been pursued by now. But doing nothing, while waiting for the North to either relent in the face of sanctions or collapse – the so-called "strategic patience" approach attributed to the Obama administration – has failed to work. And, as Pyongyang rushes toward the ability to miniaturize a nuclear warhead and fit it on a ballistic missile capable of reaching the United States – a "game changer" that some assess as perilously near (and a

few, including Pyongyang, claim is already here) – it would appear that time is on the DPRK's side.

A range of options – *the two extremes being to yield to Pyongyang's demands or to pursue a final military solution* – must be examined by the new US administration, with the understanding that no option will work unless Washington and Seoul are in lock step and others like China and Russia are, if not enthusiastically supportive, at least not working to undermine the effort. Japanese support is also crucial but much easier to assume.

First let's rule out the two extremes. No US administration could or should enter into bilateral peace accord negotiations with Pyongyang that cut Seoul out of the discussion and normalizing relations with a still nuclear weapons-equipped DPRK would in all probability sound a death knell for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and cause other dominos to fall: ROK, Japan, Taiwan, etc. Likewise a march on Pyongyang to remove the toxic regime, while within US/ROK capabilities, would result in unacceptable levels of collateral damage and should only be contemplated in response to an egregious DPRK military provocation. The solution, if there is one, lies somewhere between these extremes. Let me offer a few alternatives without pretending my list exhausts all future possibilities.

Leap Day Two. At times, DPRK interlocutors have hinted that Pyongyang would be willing to return to a "freeze for humanitarian assistance" agreement along the lines of the ill-fated 2012 Leap Day Agreement, announced on Feb 29 and undermined 16 days later when the North announced its intention to launch a satellite (which everyone but Pyongyang understood to be a violation of UNSC Resolutions prohibiting ballistic missile activity). True, a new agreement (like the original one) will not solve the problem; nonetheless, it potentially keeps things from getting worse.

We should have no illusions, however. The only verifiable aspects would be a halt to missile and nuclear tests, which are easily detected, and perhaps a freeze of reprocessing at Yongbyon (halting the known plutonium and uranium enrichment efforts), which can be monitored. Most analysts believe there are uranium enrichment sites outside Yongbyon which would not be affected and scientific research and laboratory work would continue virtually unimpeded. Nonetheless, one can argue that a new freeze is better than where we are today, is most likely to be supported by Beijing, and could lead to deeper cooperation, if it is seen as the first step toward a genuine process of denuclearization which at some point must include intrusive verification.

Simultaneous US-DPRK and ROK-DPRK dialogues leading to step-by-step normalization. Another approach involves simultaneous dialogue efforts aimed at both denuclearization and normalization with the US taking the lead on the

denuclearization front while Seoul takes the lead on peace treaty discussions. This could take place within the context of the currently moribund Six-Party Talks, which had a number of simultaneous working groups, or could proceed along parallel bilateral tracks. A “freeze for humanitarian assistance” could be the first step for either or both efforts. Pyongyang has been reluctant to discuss a peace treaty with Seoul but without direct North-South rapprochement, it seems impossible to achieve a normalization of relations with Washington, which can only come after denuclearization. This approach would immediately test Pyongyang’s sincerity and its willingness, finally, to treat the Seoul government as a sovereign equal.

Creation of a North-South Federation or Confederation. Another approach is to encourage Seoul and Pyongyang to take the first step by substituting the current hostile policies toward one another with one focused on peaceful coexistence. Former ROK President Kim Dae-Jung and DPRK Founder Kim Il-Song previously suggested such an approach. A willingness by each side to respect the other’s right to exist would create a positive atmosphere that would make all other things possible. The odds of this are rather slim, especially considering current domestic turmoil in the South, but it is worth considering and encouraging. It does not directly address the nuclear issue but could set the stage for more meaningful discussions or pursuit of one of the other options.

Serious tightening of financial sanctions to bring the North’s economy to the brink of economic collapse. This is a “much, much more of the same” approach but with a greater sense of urgency and comprehensiveness; it’s the logical extension of the current administration’s policy. UNSC Resolution 2321 is a clear step in this direction, if it is vigorously enforced. Put bluntly, this significantly enhanced sanctions approach assumes that the only way to truly “bring him to his senses” is to bring Kim Jong-un literally to his knees. Certainly there are stronger economic, political, and diplomatic steps that the US, ROK, and Japan can take unilaterally and that the UNSC could pursue multilaterally that could tighten the screws on the North’s economy and force it to choose between continuing to develop nuclear weapons or face economic collapse.

Chinese interlocutors have told me Beijing is prepared to support such an approach in the face of continued DPRK recalcitrance and defiance, but China’s actions have fallen short of its words. As long as Pyongyang is convinced that Beijing will not turn off its life support, it is hard to have much confidence in this approach. Fortunately, the reverse is also true, but one wonders what Pyongyang has to do to finally convince Beijing that enough is enough. The North Koreans seem to believe that China needs them more than they need China. Unfortunately, Chinese actions reinforce this belief. An all-out sanctions approach could work, even without genuine Chinese support, but it would be harder and take a lot longer.

Regime change by other than overt military means. Regrettably, the time is rapidly approaching (if not already here) that a policy of actively pursuing and promoting regime change needs to be clearly put on the table. All too often, regime change is equated to military action but there are a number of overt and covert steps that can be taken to destabilize and ultimately replace the Kim Jong-Un regime with one more willing to trade its nuclear capability for

economic development. Traditionally North Korean elite rallied around the ruling family since this was the best guarantee of their own survival and success. As more senior officials face the firing squad, however – and rumor has it that six of the eight pallbearers at his father’s funeral have been purged or put to death – the reverse may become the case. Psychological operations can hasten this view. For its part, Pyongyang has long accused Washington and Seoul of pursuing a regime change policy. Perhaps it’s time to show the North what one really looks like. Even if this option is not pursued, openly discussing it will send an important signal to Pyongyang that time may not in fact be on its side.

If the US, ROK, and others have really concluded that nothing will stop Kim Jong-Un from pursuing nuclear weapons and his ability to hold the US mainland at risk is rapidly approaching or is already here, then regime change (by non-military means) may be the only credible alternative to living with and accepting the DPRK as a nuclear weapon state.

The concern here is not a surprise DPRK nuclear attack on the ROK, the US, or Japan. Such an action is the equivalent of instant suicide for the North Korean state. The concern is that Kim Jong-Un will think he has Washington deterred and will step up provocative actions that could lead us down a slippery slope. Likewise, in a period of increased tension, if it was determined that the North had a long-range missile potentially equipped with a nuclear warhead on a launch pad, preemption by the US would have to be considered, again with escalatory consequences.

For any regime change option to work (or at least to increase the prospects for success), the US and ROK would have to coordinate with Beijing and Moscow and indicate that, if they cooperate, the US/ROK would be open to the survival of the North Korean state, but not the current leadership. While Korean Peninsula reunification under Seoul remains the long-term objective, peaceful coexistence between the ROK and a denuclearized, more cooperative and open DPRK should be an acceptable near-term goal. This will also address the Chinese concern about maintaining a North Korean “buffer zone.” Buffer zones have little real applicability in the age of the Internet and cyber warfare, not to mention long-range strike capabilities. Nonetheless, many Chinese strategists cite the need for a buffer zone in arguing against various collapse scenarios. Maintaining a North Korean state – albeit a kinder, gentler, denuclearized version – should satisfy this perceived need while achieving Beijing’s primary stated goal of “regional stability.” It is becoming increasingly obvious that you cannot have such stability as long as the DPRK clings to, and threatens to use, its nuclear weapons.

To be clear, I am not recommending that the new administration pursue a regime change option . . . yet. This is a risky strategy that should not be taken lightly. But neither should it be taken off the table. Circumstances may make it the only viable option short of war to ensure future peace and stability. If the North steadfastly refuses to give up its nuclear weapons and continues to demand it be accepted as a nuclear weapon state, its neighbors would be compelled to live with an explosive situation and leader and be subjected to nuclear blackmail or worse. The risks associated with not taking more dramatic steps in dealing with the North may soon exceed the

risks of doing nothing and hoping for the best. This requires that all options be on the table and seriously discussed.

For more on this argument, and for differing perspectives from other concerned parties (including the DPRK), please see the (pending) 2017 Regional Security Outlook produced by the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (soon to be available at www.cscap.org).

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