



***HINTS OF A NEW NORTH KOREA
NUCLEAR STRATEGY***

BY BRAD GLOSSERMAN

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For more from this author, visit his recent chapter of [Comparative Connections](#).

Make no mistake: North Korea leader Kim Jong Un truly believes he needs nuclear weapons.

For years, that need reflected a single objective: the protection and maintenance of his regime. A nuclear arsenal was a defensive tool—a deterrent—to ensure that no foreign power would attack his country and end the Cold War division of the Korean Peninsula. Kim’s rationale for possessing nuclear weapons seems to be shifting and his rhetoric and accompanying military developments indicate a new focus—the acquisition of a war-fighting capability.

In the May 9 *Japan Times*, Gabriel Dominguez [argued](#) that North Korea wants nuclear weapons to “offset its weaknesses against the superior conventional military capabilities of the United States and regional allies Japan and South Korea.” I’m inclined to a more ominous explanation. Kim wants nuclear weapons for coercion. It looks as though Kim has resurrected his grandfather’s dream of unifying the whole of Korea

under Pyongyang’s flag—and nuclear weapons will assist him in that quest.

Since they began in 2003, an uncomfortable fact has clouded negotiations to get North Korea to give up its nuclear capability: Pyongyang’s commitment to the development and acquisition of a nuclear weapon is absolute, a requisite for regime survival that cannot be bargained away. For all the talk of complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization or its subsequent variants, that wasn’t a real option.

Negotiations had two unspoken goals for the United States and like-minded governments. First, talks would buy time so pressures would build and force the collapse of North Korea. Second, they would reveal Pyongyang as unreasonable and intransigent and rally other governments behind a policy that would pressure the North to give up its weapons or collapse.

The regime proved more durable—and lucky—than many anticipated. It survived the negotiations and kept the other five parties in the Six Party Talks from uniting against it and forcing it to make concessions. It exploded its first nuclear device in October 2006, while the talks continued and has conducted five tests since—the last in September 2017. There are reports that a seventh test may occur [sometime soon](#), perhaps in days.

Equally important has been Pyongyang’s determination to hone its delivery systems. It has steadily developed its missiles, lengthening their range, increasing throw weight, and improving mobility, which requires greater accuracy in targeting. Most recently, it is thought to be miniaturizing components, allowing it to send more payloads farther.

This year, North Korea has conducted a record 16 missile tests as of mid-May, including the testing of two intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of hitting the US homeland and a guided missile that can reportedly deliver a tactical nuclear weapon. A May 7 test-launch featured a submarine-launched ballistic missile; such missiles are harder to detect, and better-suited to a surprise attack.

The focus on smaller nuclear weapons is particularly worrisome, because it suggests that Kim now thinks he can fight a war with a tactical nuclear weapon.

Andrei Lankov, a Russian expert on the North who teaches at Kookmin University in Seoul, has been sounding the alarm. He told the *Financial Times* that North Korea's strategy has changed. A program that was initially "purely defensive"—a product of fears that "without nuclear weapons they would be invaded"—is now "clearly overkill from a defensive point of view." The new capabilities make Lankov "strongly suspect that their ultimate dream is to assert their control over South Korea."

That was his grandfather's dream, one that he tried to make real in 1950 with a bloody, ill-fated invasion of the South. Later, Kim Il Sung appears to have accepted co-existence with South Korea after the Cold War, although we'll never know his actual intent in agreeing to a nuclear deal with Jimmy Carter, a proxy for President Bill Clinton, in 1994. Kim Il Sung died soon after. I'm inclined to believe that his son, Kim Jong Il, knew that reunification was impossible given the balance of forces he inherited and the appalling shape of his country.

Recent statements by Kim Jong Un and other senior officials suggest those grand ambitions have been revived. Kim last month spoke of a "secondary mission" for the country's nuclear forces, adding that "our nuclear (arsenal) cannot be tied to this one mission of war prevention."

Gibum Kim, a researcher at the Korea Institute for Defense Analyses, a government-funded think tank, emailed that development of nonstrategic, low-yield nuclear weapons is consistent with statements from Kim and other officials "that they are working toward 'diversification,' 'miniaturization,' and 'lightening.'" He also said that ambition is much longer lived, pointing to a 2016 order of Kim's to the North Korean military to "convert (their) mode of military counteraction toward the enemies into a pre-emptive attack one in every aspect."

Paul Choi, a military expert in Seoul, agrees with Gibum and Lankov. "North Korea's advancing

military capabilities and changing nuclear doctrine reflect Kim's pursuit of a more coercive strategy and posture," he explained in an email. Pyongyang "seeks to control escalation, if not dictate the terms of conflict (including its termination), and be the dominant force (the product of capabilities, commitment, and threshold of risk)." Especially worrying is Choi's assessment that tactical nuclear weapons are aimed at being able to prevail in a fight that may include territorial expansion.

External developments have no doubt reinforced Pyongyang's thinking. Western governments' concern about Russian nuclear escalation to break the stalemate in Ukraine makes the North Korean pulse quicken. Western restraint and refusal to put boots on the ground as it supports Kyiv seems to underscore the deterrent effect of nuclear threats. But, Choi cautioned, North Korea is also learning "about the formidable challenge of controlling any territory with a resisting population."

A second external development is the return to power of a conservative president in Seoul. New President Yoon Suk-yeol has promised to prioritize the alliance with the US over inter-Korean relations, which will deprive Pyongyang of a vocal advocate in otherwise skeptical capitals.

A senior member of the presidential transition committee, who worked on foreign affairs and national security, agreed that Kim Jong Un shares his grandfather's dream of unifying the Peninsula under the North. "Diplomacy and negotiation for denuclearization have always been tools to earn more time and political space to continuously develop nuclear weapons," the committee member says. "For Pyongyang, military threat is leverage to force the US and the ROK to accept nuclear arms reduction negotiations, a peace treaty, withdrawal of (US forces in Korea) and eventually a socialized Korean peninsula."

Note, however, that those developments *reinforce* North Korean thinking. Pyongyang has its own logic and central to that thinking is the necessity of a nuclear capability; recent developments confirm existing

beliefs. Or to put it differently, the outside world has limited ability to redirect North Korean policy.

There is no need to hyperventilate, however. Coercion and expansion may be the goals, but they both remain beyond Kim's grasp. South Korea is not Ukraine. It's a treaty ally and US commitments, conventional and nuclear, are steadfast. I've heard North Korean officials talk about a relationship with the US akin to that of the Soviet Union, which was characterized by nuclear parity. That's a fantasy. A nuclear threat is not the equivalent of mutually assured destruction.

The North has a long way to go to turn its ambitions into reality. Gium Kim explained that a test or two (or 16) isn't enough. North Korea would have to spend lots of money to build the logistical infrastructure for nuclear use and maintenance, train for nuclear use and, "most unimaginable of all," prepare to delegate authority to field commanders for nuclear use in wartime.

Still, the US, South Korea, and Japan must plan on continued acquisition and sharpening of North Korean nuclear capabilities and prepare to better deter and defend. Yoon has said that he wants to work more closely with Washington and Tokyo to do that, and President Joe Biden is reportedly going to reiterate nuclear assurances to US allies during his trip to the region [beginning this week](#).

The signals must be clear to discourage Kim Jong Un from reviving those dangerous dreams of unification or miscalculating his way into a nuclear conflict.

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