



TIME FOR A SHIFT ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA

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North Korea conducted another intercontinental ballistic missile test on April 13, the second in less than a month. Unlike previous launches, however, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un presided over [what Pyongyang claimed](#) was an ICBM powered by a solid-fueled engine. This would represent another milestone in Pyongyang's decades-long effort to field an operational missile capability despite being the subject of one of the most stringent UN Security Council [sanctions regimes](#) in existence. A reliable North Korean solid-fueled ICBM would be of particular concern to the United States during a war-time contingency—solid-fueled missiles can be assembled rapidly, [are easier to conceal](#) compared to liquid-fueled variants, and can be prepared on-site, giving the United States far less time to locate and neutralize them before launch.

As expected, the United States, South Korea, and Japan condemned the latest test. Tokyo, which [issued an emergency alert](#) to residents on the island of Hokkaido, requested an emergency UN Security Council meeting. The next day, Washington authorized two separate bilateral military drills with South Korea and Japan, [including B-52 bombers](#) and F-35 fighters. The drills were designed to send a message: more missile tests, particularly those with the capacity to reach targets on the continental United States, will result in more defensive measures by Washington and its East Asian allies in response.

Drills beget drills

None of these moves are especially surprising. The Biden administration is spending significant effort this year bolstering the credibility of US extended deterrence to its South Korean and Japanese allies. In January, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and South Korean Minister of National Defense Lee Jong-sup engaged in a series of meetings in Seoul, during which Washington [pledged to “enhance](#) the implementation of US extended deterrence” through increased deployment of US strategic assets on and near the Korean Peninsula.

This came roughly two weeks after South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol suggested it may be time for South Korea to build its own nuclear weapons, or at least request the return of US tactical nuclear warheads on South Korean soil. [Yoon's comments](#) got the attention of US defense officials; in the ensuing months, a variety of US strategic combat systems have been rotated to the area.

In February, US and South Korean officials participated in [table-top exercises](#) at the Pentagon with a specific focus on responding to a number of scenarios involving North Korean nuclear use. US B-1B Lancers joined exercises with South Korean forces at least four times this year. The USS Nimitz, a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier, docked in the South Korean port city of Busan [in late March](#). In April, Washington and Seoul executed the largest military field exercises in five years. Separate exercises occur as well, including [trilateral anti-submarine warfare drills](#) between US, South Korean, and Japanese naval forces. Similar exercises are now ongoing, with Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo regularizing them in the future to improve naval force inter-operability.

This has predictably elicited strong countermeasures from the North Koreans. The “security dilemma”—where “defensive” exercises are perceived by the adversary as a belligerent action—is very much alive on the Korean Peninsula. What Washington, Seoul,

and Tokyo view as entirely justifiable, Pyongyang views as aggressive and thus deserving of retaliation.

Can the cycle of escalation be broken?

It is hard to see this cycle ending anytime soon. Ordinarily, such situations would be contained through diplomatic engagement, either between the parties themselves (oftentimes discreetly) or through a trusted intermediary. Unfortunately, there does not appear to be any diplomatic channel on the horizon. The Biden administration has reached out to the Kim regime multiple times to jumpstart a new negotiation after talks failed during the Trump era. But Kim Jong Un rejected the overtures and is unlikely to green-light any serious negotiating effort as long as US policy centers on North Korea's total and irreversible denuclearization. South Korea, which acted as a facilitator of direct US-North Korea diplomacy during Moon Jae-in's presidency, is no longer seen by the North Koreans as a credible interlocutor due to President Yoon's hardline approach toward Pyongyang. (North Korea has even ignored daily military-to-military phone calls from the South for nearly two weeks.)

In an ideal world, China would exploit its considerable financial and political leverage over North Korea to aid Washington in bringing the Kim regime to the negotiating table. Yet, given the terrible state of US-China relations, Beijing has little incentive to help Washington on a foreign policy dispute that has confounded multiple US administrations for decades.

Additional economic pressure is unlikely to bring Kim to the table either. The UN Security Council has been deadlocked on the North Korean nuclear issue since 2017, with the United States and China arguing over who is at fault. Permanent members Russia and China use their veto power to block individual sanctions designations, and the prospect of a new UN Security Council sanctions resolution passing is too low to even theorize about. Beijing and Moscow increasingly see sanctions as worsening the internal food and economic crisis in North Korea and should therefore be loosened or removed. The United States found out the hard way when it tabled a draft resolution in May

2022, only to walk away from the council chamber disappointed after the Russian and Chinese delegations cast [a double veto](#). Even if the North Koreans conducted another nuclear test, there is no guarantee the Security Council could conjure up the unanimity required to issue a statement condemning it. With the UN paralyzed, the Biden administration has relied on unilateral sanctions designations ever since to penalize North Korea for everything from [illicit financial practices](#) and [fuel smuggling](#) to [the development of weapons](#) of mass destruction and [human rights abuses](#). Even so, the North Koreans have proven by necessity to be highly meticulous sanctions evaders.

Washington, therefore, is left with a short list of options. Continuing to strengthen the sanctions regime is the most likely course of action, if only out of bureaucratic habit, yet by definition is highly reactive to North Korean behavior and holds low probability of success. Maintaining the current pace of US military deployments in East Asia will be welcomed by Seoul and Tokyo but also risks prompting more North Korean missile tests and military exercises—up to and including a seventh underground nuclear test. Fostering a detente between the two Koreas is probably a dead-end as long as the Yoon administration's hard line continues.

The North Korean nuclear issue is a low priority for the Biden administration. The United States is currently content with treading water and waiting for the Kim regime to accept its overtures. Assuming Washington wants to solve or at least contain the problem, the time has come for a major policy shift. The most dramatic shift would be recognition among the United States and its allies that denuclearization is infeasible when North Korea already possesses dozens of nuclear warheads, will likely construct more, and is in the process of diversifying its delivery systems. Avoiding a war through a mixture of deterrence, engagement, and practical diplomacy should now be the paramount US national security objective on the Korean Peninsula, not transforming North Korea into a non-nuclear state. If the United States intends to maintain a consistently high pace of military exercises with South Korea, Washington

should establish protocols to minimize confusion and mixed signaling with North Korea.

This will likely require direct communication between US and North Korean military officers and perhaps advanced, mutual notifications about the timing and location of various military and missile exercises to decrease misperceptions. In addition, the United States, in coordination with China, should be willing to exchange basic information on nuclear safety and maintenance with North Korea—that the United States is highly unlikely to recognize North Korea as a legitimate nuclear-armed state does not obviate the need to ensure Pyongyang’s nuclear practices are up to standard. The United States should also stop prefacing US-North Korea engagement on the nuclear issue alone; maintaining a cold peace on the Korean Peninsula involves discussions beyond the nuclear component, including, but not limited to, the disposition of conventional forces on both sides of the 150-mile Demilitarized Zone, de-escalation mechanisms between the two Koreas, and common rules of engagement along disputed boundaries like the Northern Limit Line.

Only when realistic, achievable goals are set can an effective strategy be formulated.

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