



DATE: July 10, 2017

SUBJECT: North Korea: Have We Reach the Point of No Return? (Teleconference)

MAIN POINTS

- The Kim regime's rationale for the nuclear program
 - North Korea's long-term strategic thinking and US response
 - Current outlook and analysis of potential solutions
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EVENT OVERVIEW

Date: July 10, 2017

Time: 10:00 a.m. – 11:00 a.m.

Location: Wilson Center

Attendees:

- **Jane Harman**, Director, President, and CEO, Wilson Center
 - **Aaron David Miller**, Vice President for New Initiatives and Distinguished Scholar
 - **James Person**, Director, Hyundai Motor-Korea Foundation Center for Korean History and Public Policy
 - **David Sanger**, National Security Correspondent, The New York Times; and former Public Policy Scholar, Woodrow Wilson Center
 - **Jean H. Lee**, Global Fellow; Journalist and former Pyongyang Bureau Chief, Associated Press
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SUMMARY

Introduction:

North Korea's test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) on July 4 has significantly heightened tensions on the Korean Peninsula – and has left the Trump administration with some very

tough choices. The situation in North Korea has changed for the worse. If time was ever an ally in resolving Pyongyang's nuclear threat, it certainly isn't now. The panel attending this teleconference mainly discussed how Washington will respond to this latest act of belligerence, and which options, including coercive diplomacy through more sanctions, isolation, military action or threats of military action, a freeze on nuclear development, and denuclearization, will be practical. In this discussion, the panel expressed their opinion on whether our relationship with and the developments in North Korea have reached the point of no return.

Jean H. Lee: The Kim regime's rationale behind their nuclear program

The nuclear program has been the hallmark of Kim Jong-un's regime for two reasons. At home, Kim Jong-un hopes to establish himself as a supreme leader capable of defending his people. Given that Kim Jong-un was a virtually invisible young man without a reputation prior to taking control, he hopes to gain people's trust and absolute obedience by establishing a strong nuclear arsenal. In terms of global affairs, building nuclear weapons will allow Kim Jong-un, an inexperienced leader craving attention, to sit on the negotiating table with powers like the US and EU, and even gain potential financial and food aid in exchange for cooperation. Despite the fact that the nuclear program was developed at the expense of food and basic necessities for the North Korean people, Kim Jong-un has managed to justify his actions – the rising tension in the region and the tough reactions from the demonized U.S. all proved the necessity of the nuclear program in North Koreans' minds.

Counterintuitively, the South Koreans, who are less than 40 miles away from the North Korean border are not particularly unsettled by North Korea's recent provocations, as they are accustomed to the belligerent attitude of the North Koreans. On the other hand, they are worried about the likelihood of the newly elected Moon administration acting "recklessly and impetuously," and eventually triggering an armed conflict with the North. President Moon made it clear that while he would be tough on North Korea, he hoped to have sincere and fruitful negotiations with the Kim regime.

James Person: North Korea's long-term strategic thinking and US response

North Korea's July 4th ICBM launch was deemed by some as a "game changer," as the ICBM puts North Korea as the third country – after Russia and China – capable of striking the US homeland. Some people mistakenly believe that an attack on the US is imminent, as the North Korean leader was an irrational man who thinks little about ramifications. The history of the US dealing with China, however, has proven this claim wrong. China, "a backward and impoverished country" back in the 1960s, did not launch an attack on the US after they developed their ICBM. Deterrence worked for China, and would work for North Korea, whose leader, contrary to what most believe, is very rational.

North Korea's reason for developing the nuclear program is to preserve the regime and, to a certain extent, to grab the world's attention. Its defensive rationale goes back a long time, and was rooted in its anti-colonial thinking of the predatory and malign nature of the world. As manifested in the archive documents from North Korea's former communist allies, the strategic thinking behind North Korea's nuclear weapons development goes back to the 1960, as a response to the perceived threat from the

unreliable USSR and the US. This systematic thinking demonstrates the inner logic of North Korea's nuclear programs, as well as the rationality of North Korean leaders.

As previously discussed, it is unfeasible to persuade North Korea to disband its nuclear program as a prerequisite for talks. The best option on the table is to negotiate a freeze on North Korea's nuclear missile test, striking a balance between reassuring South Korea and Japan, without sabotaging the security dilemma with North Korea. Additionally, reassessing China's interests in this issue is paramount. China's interests do not align with that of the US, and therefore China is unlikely to act in terms favorable to the US. Furthermore, North Korea's perspective about the history of its relationship with China presents the likelihood that Pyongyang will perceive any effort by China to push for its denuclearization as another Chinese attempt to be overly intrusive in North Korean affairs. Only the US can deescalate this security dilemma with North Korea.

David Sanger: Current outlook and analysis of potential solutions

Now is definitely not the best time to solve the North Korean nuclear issue; previous presidents did not put in enough energy to stop the development of North Korea's nuclearization, and it is almost impossible now to undo their decisions. Presidents Obama and Bush decided it was better to concentrate their efforts on Iran than on North Korea. President Clinton made a decisive move of negotiating with the North Korean leadership in 1994, but ended up being betrayed by them.

Drawing from America's history of dealing with North Korea, many suggest that deterrence is the best solution. Two worrying scenarios, however, hardly make that argument convincing. Firstly, if North Korea fell apart and its regime collapsed, their nuclear weapons could fall into the hands of other rogue states and pose a grave threat to international security. Moreover, once North Korea has any demonstrable ability to attack mainland US, it limits US options in terms of defending South Korea and Japan. Decision-making is affected when there is likelihood of retaliation. Owing to the possible ramifications associated with deterrence, some prefer negotiating a freeze on North Korea's nuclear program. However, even though it's better to freeze their nuclear capabilities sooner than later, a freeze cannot help achieve eventual denuclearization; it will only enshrine North Korea's current capability. Other defensive options include reviving Bush's Proliferation Security Initiative without risking escalation, using cyber technology to disable North Korea's nuclear initiative, as we did from 2014 to the end of last year, and finally, forcing the end of North Korea's energy supply.

Q&A

Q: The North Korean leader has said that North Korea would negotiate on the ballistic missile issue if the US ends its hostile policy. Why don't we start from there?

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A (Person): North Korea has been claiming this for decades. US-led joint military exercises are perceived as a threat, in part justifiably, and have been used by North Korea to justify their aggressive programs.

A (Lee): North Korea does want to negotiate, but on their terms. The US also has negotiated with North Korea before but has been burned, and therefore has to approach negotiation very cautiously.

Q: What are the ways of reducing tension that give North Korea a face-saving way out?

A (Sanger): First of all, there are no great options. Reducing tension is critical, but comes at a cost. We need to find out what our objectives are, and perhaps provide North Korea with an empowered strategy to get a sense of what the parameters are.

A (Person): North Korea has been trying to engage with the US since March 1974, and has been consistently using aggressive policies to get the US to the negotiating table. This implies that the key to solve the North Korea issue is not to outsource the problem to the Chinese, whom the North Koreans deeply distrust. Only the US can solve the problem without antagonizing North Korea further.

Q: North Korea's ability to hit the US may cause Japan and South Korea to lose their confidence in US willingness to defend them, and thus be compelled to have their own nuclear deterrence. Why is there no visible discussion of this issue in the media?

A (Sanger): This issue was actually intensely discussed in the media, especially during a foreign-policy interview with President Trump last year. Trump believed that both Japan and South Korea should be allowed to develop their own nuclear weapons, as they would do it anyway. This article can still be found online. President Trump has not, however, mentioned these issues again after taking office, which is very interesting.

A (Person): To reassure US allies, the US should never make decisions such as suspending military exercises without consulting them.

Report by: Yezi Liu, Research Intern