Fear and Insecurity: Addressing North Korean Threat Perceptions

PATRICK M. CRONIN
ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY CHAIR, HUDSON INSTITUTE
Hudson Institute would like to thank the Korea Foundation for its support of this research and publication. The author is grateful to all those who assisted in the completion of this project.

Many American and South Korean officials and experts participated in project workshops and smaller discussions over the past year. In addition, several others made vital contributions to this volume. Hudson Research Associate Ryan Neuhard and intern Allison Pluemer assisted with various aspects of this project. Publications Director Carolyn Stewart oversaw completion of this report. Anne Himmelfarb improved the written product through her careful editing.

ABOUT HUDSON INSTITUTE

Hudson Institute is a research organization promoting American leadership and global engagement for a secure, free, and prosperous future.

Founded in 1961 by strategist Herman Kahn, Hudson Institute challenges conventional thinking and helps manage strategic transitions to the future through interdisciplinary studies in defense, international relations, economics, health care, technology, culture, and law.

Hudson seeks to guide public policy makers and global leaders in government and business through a vigorous program of publications, conferences, policy briefings and recommendations.

Visit www.hudson.org for more information.

Hudson Institute
1201 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Fourth Floor
Washington, D.C. 20004

+1.202.974.2400
info@hudson.org
www.hudson.org

Cover: This photo taken on December 3, 2018 shows pedestrians walking past the portraits of late North Korean leaders Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il across Kim Il-sung square in Pyongyang, (Ed Jones/AFP)
Fear and Insecurity: Addressing North Korean Threat Perceptions

PATRICK M. CRONIN
ASIA-PACIFIC SECURITY CHAIR, HUDSON INSTITUTE
Dr. Patrick M. Cronin holds the Chair for Asia-Pacific Security at Hudson Institute. Before joining Hudson in January 2019, he was the Senior Director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). Previously, he headed the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) at the National Defense University, where he also oversaw the Center for the Study of Chinese Military Affairs. Before leading INSS, Dr. Cronin served as the Director of Studies at the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS); Senior Vice President and Director of Research at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); the third-highest ranking official at the US Agency for International Development (USAID); the Director of Research at the US Institute of Peace; and an intelligence officer in the US Navy Reserve.

Dr. Cronin is the author of many publications on the United States and Asian security. He is a regular columnist for DongA Ilbo, and his major works related to Korea include Pathways to Peace: Achieving the Stable Transformation of the Korean Peninsula (co-author; Hudson Institute, 2020); The Cornerstone and the Linchpin: Securing America’s Alliances in Northeast Asia (Hudson Institute, 2019); Negotiating with North Korea: How Will This End? (co-author; CNAS, 2019); A Precarious Accord: Navigating the Post-Summit Landscape (co-author; CNAS, 2018); Breakthrough on the Peninsula: Third Offset Strategies and the Future Defense of Korea (editor and co-author; CNAS, 2016); Solving Long Division: The Geopolitical Implications of Korean Unification (co-author; CNAS, 2015); If Deterrence Fails: Rethinking Conflict on the Korean Peninsula (CNAS, 2014); Vital Venture: The Economic Engagement of North Korea and the Kaesong Industrial Complex (CNAS, 2012); Pressure: Coercive Economic Statecraft and U.S. National Security (co-author; CNAS, 2011); and Double Trouble: International Security and the Challenge of Iran and North Korea (editor and contributing author; Praeger International Security, 2007).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1. Introduction</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2. Fears: Enemies Near and Far</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3. Threats: The Seven Campaigns</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4. Deterrence, Diplomacy, and Related Goals</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5. Conclusion: Threat Perceptions and the Alliance</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Diplomacy with North Korea must factor in an understanding of the Kim regime’s fears and insecurity. Pyongyang’s military actions and negotiating gambits jeopardize the United States, South Korea, and other nations’ vital interests and policy goals. Accordingly, the study of North Korean threat perceptions—how Kim Jong-un thinks about the utility of force and about threats to his regime—is essential for averting strategic surprise and buttressing diplomacy. National security strategy should be systematic, a deliberate calculation about national capabilities to achieve crucial objectives. It should be infused with an understanding of other actors, both friend and foe.

A coherent national security strategy begins with clear and realistic written objectives. If aims are vague, it will be difficult to concentrate resources and mobilize others around a common cause. Similarly, if a nation’s goals are too ambitious and surpass the prospects or means for success, then the national security strategy represents wishful thinking and will likewise be difficult to carry out. What is needed is a serious attempt to grapple with the world as it exists and to harmonize a nation’s crucial ends with existing means.

Because war and peace involve international relations between two or more actors, national goals must consider other actors’ core interests, concerns, and aspirations. Preventing conflict and securing peace may depend on considering other countries’ interests, especially when dealing with an adversary like North Korea. Consider the Trump administration’s “desired end state” for North Korea as a country that “no longer poses a threat to the US homeland or our allies,” with a Korean peninsula “free
of nuclear, chemical, cyber, and biological weapons. Putting aside the fantastical vision of a North Korea that poses no threats to the United States or its allies, the Trump administration’s objective was to exert “maximum pressure” to “convince the Kim regime that the only path to its survival is to relinquish its nuclear weapons.” The likelihood of attaining that goal—a multi-decade aim of convincing North Korea to abandon nuclear weapons—hinges on the value the regime attaches to nuclear weapons.

There should be no doubt at this point that the Kim family treasures its nuclear weapons. But awareness of this point is not enough. US policy must rest on the most accurate and complete view of North Korean threat perceptions possible. As the Biden administration conducts a policy review to devise a new approach, in consultation with South Korea, Japan, and other allies, one enduring challenge remains to have a sound grasp of North Korea’s thinking.

Conventional wisdom holds that regime survival is the ruling Kim family’s paramount goal. If that is so, it is almost inconceivable that Kim Jong-un would peacefully relinquish nuclear weapons to deter foreign military intervention. In the judgment of North Korean observer Andrei Lankov, the Kim family has never “let go of its long-cherished goal—to be able to nuke any American city, and at any time.” But Kim’s other significant interests, such as economic power and North Korean modernization, suggest there is diplomatic opportunity to reduce the risk of war on the peninsula, if not necessarily eliminate nuclear weapons anytime soon. A combination of security guarantees, finance and development assistance, and political measures could lead to diplomatic progress with Pyongyang, perhaps even to what might in retrospect be seen as a breakthrough.

Finding the Goldilocks solution—not too hot, not too cold, but just right—requires understanding, not just the fears but also the dreams of Kim Jong-un. Even if Kim Jong-un refuses meaningful restraints on his nuclear and missile programs in exchange for diplomatic normalization steps, delving into Kim’s thinking about threats can inform policy. If the status quo is the best that can be achieved, then knowledge of how North Korean elites perceive threats can help allied officials exert pressure to preserve deterrence and stability.

Knowledge of how the Kim family perceives threats can also inform conflict prevention and crisis management. While it may be impossible to placate Kim, a solid grasp of North Korean threat perceptions can avert the crossing of red lines that would trigger unnecessary or catastrophic use of force. The danger of escalation must also consider geography, history, and the state of international relations—raising questions about the role of China, Japan, Russia, and other actors.

This report addresses North Korean threat perceptions by examining the ruling elite’s basic instincts of fear and insecurity and puts forth constructive ideas for diplomacy, crisis management, and security policy. It aims at a bare minimum to contribute to maintaining peace and security on the Korean peninsula. It also seeks to stimulate creative policy options to help Washington and Seoul decision-makers manage one of Asia’s significant flashpoints.

Building an accurate picture of North Korean threat perceptions is challenging but doable. The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (also referred to as DPRK, and North Korea) is a totalitarian society with tight control over information. Yet advances in technology and decades of US experience with North Korea, including high-level diplomacy with leaders and members of the Korean Workers’ Party (KWP) and Korean People’s Army (KPA), have demystified the Hermit Kingdom. Addressing DPRK threat perceptions requires gathering reliable information, sifting through a range of suppositions, and enumerating probabilities. There is more than a seven-decade record of war and cold war on the Korean peninsula on which to draw.

But humility is needed when it comes to separating North Korean fact from fiction. After all, North Korea appears as determined
as ever to deploy and modernize a military arsenal that includes nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that can strike the United States. Accepting the new title of General Secretary, Kim Jong-un told the Eighth Party Congress in January that he planned to build both “small and light” and “super-large” nuclear weapons. Kim’s rationale for his nuclear program is undoubtedly to promote political objectives—such as preventing regime change from either within or without—so that he can unlock economic development and retain power for years. But just because Kim focuses on political goals doesn’t mean that he lacks grander military plans or other ambitions.

Even if the Kim regime were entirely transparent, it is not easy to view a traditional enemy without prejudice. Assessing an adversary requires overcoming cognitive bias based on emotion, entrenched views, and experience. Neither the Kim family and its cadre of elite advisors nor decision-makers within the United States and South Korea are impervious to the profound dynamics—political and psychological, explicit and implicit—that produce confirmation bias. Further, judging another actor’s threat perceptions requires possessing an objective sense of oneself—an elementary axiom of strategy. The requirement harkens back to the classical Chinese aphorism of Sun Tzu: “He who knows the enemy and himself will never in a hundred battles be at risk.”

This report draws on the considerable body of open-source material about interactions with North Korea. It emphasizes sources from the United States and the Republic of Korea (also referred to as ROK, and South Korea), but it incorporates written and verbal analysis by other officials and experts, including some who participated in relevant research workshops. Classified sources available to government officials would undoubtedly provide a higher-definition portrait of North Korean threat perceptions. But even an unclassified report on North Korean threat perceptions should help clarify decisions regarding negotiations, deterrence, crisis prevention, and de-escalation and should highlight ideas for a forward-looking US-ROK alliance vision for talks with North Korea.

This study centers on six questions about North Korean threat perceptions and their implications for the US-ROK alliance.

1. **Kim’s fears**: How does North Korea’s ruling elite think about threats to the regime?

2. **Kim’s threats**: How does North Korea’s ruling elite think about the challenges and threats it poses to the ROK-US alliance and other external actors?

3. **Deterrence**: What are the implications of North Korean threat perceptions for maintaining deterrence?

4. **Diplomacy**: What are the implications of North Korean threat perceptions for diplomacy?

5. **Crisis management**: What are the implications of North Korean threat perceptions for escalating and de-escalating a crisis?

6. **Security assurances**: What security assurances and other measures are most useful for addressing the Kim regime’s insecurities without creating greater insecurity for the US-ROK alliance?

This report includes five chapters organized around these questions. Following the first chapter’s introduction of threat perceptions and North Korea, Chapter 2 focuses on the question of the Kim family’s fears, including both internal and external threats. Chapter 3 focuses on the question of Kim’s threats, analyzing various threats through the prism of seven campaigns pursued by Pyongyang since the Korean War. Chapter 4 focuses on the remaining four questions and explores how the United States, South Korea, and others can maintain deterrence, advance diplomacy, avoid crisis escalation, and provide security assurances that help North Korea walk back its nuclear programs. Chapter 5 offers a brief conclusion by returning to the current moment, in which the Biden administration, working with the South Korean government led by President Moon Jae-in, attempts to discover a path for creating durable peace on the peninsula.
A decade into his reign, Kim Jong-un has consolidated his power and built an armed force capable of deterring outside military intervention. Kim declared his nuclear program to have been completed in late 2017. Nevertheless, the North Korean leader began 2021 with a pledge to modernize and refine North Korea’s arsenal by building “ultramodern tactical nuclear weapons,” “hypersonic gliding-flight warheads,” “multi-warhead” missiles, and land- and submarine-launched ICBMs that use solid fuel. Possessing growing space and cyberspace capabilities, armed with unknown amounts of chemical and biological weapons, and defended by a large conventional force and elite special forces, North Korea is an exceptionally disciplined and dangerous military power. But toward what end? It appears deterred from using lethal force for fear of igniting a war it would lose. Indeed, despite accumulating a uniquely lethal strategic arsenal, both the Kim family and the North Korean elite in general appear fearful of both domestic and foreign threats.

Kim’s expanded appetite for strategic weapons suggests North Korea’s arms buildup is not solely based on hostile external forces. Beyond deterring foreign attempts at regime change, these programs also enhance North Korea’s international status, solidify Kim’s domestic power (especially with the military), provide negotiating leverage and potential future bargaining chips, and bolster military plans. His commitment to “further strengthen[ing] our nuclear deterrence,” affirmed at a party congress in January, may be based on pride, given that Kim boasts that his weapons represent “the exploit of greatest significance in the history of the Korean nation.” But the acquisition of armaments also
appears to be based on fear, as Kim dubs America "our foremost principal enemy."\textsuperscript{12}

It is tempting to dismiss North Korean official media complaints about foreign forces operating on and around the peninsula as pure propaganda. But from the perspective of General Secretary Kim, the fear of a sudden decapitation strike is not without foundation. In early 2020, the United States used a drone in the targeted killing of Major General Qassim Suleimani, commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force.\textsuperscript{13} The Kim regime might see assaults on critical infrastructure as even more likely than assassination by drone. It has been 40 years since Israel destroyed Iraq's Osirak nuclear reactor, but in 2007 the Israelis conducted a similar raid on a covert nuclear reactor, built with North Korean support, in Syria.\textsuperscript{14}

Still, it is challenging to separate Kim's legitimate fears of US military intervention from his offensive goals. Although US forces could help Kim balance relations with China, Kim wishes to dislodge the United States from the peninsula, thereby removing the most significant impediment to his ambitions. One can discern both fear and longing in Kim's remarks in January that placed priority on "subduing and defeating the United States, our biggest enemy, and the main obstacle to our revolutionary developments."\textsuperscript{15} Kim and North Korea's ruling elite probably remain on edge over American and ROK-US military power. They are likely to remain so even if North Korea fields a nuclear inventory similar to that of Pakistan. Pakistan is thought to possess more than 120 nuclear warheads and is on its way to doubling that inventory over the next several years in order to deter India's superior conventional forces and maintain a regional balance of power.\textsuperscript{16} It is noteworthy that North Korea is China's only official ally, and Pakistan has recently become one of Beijing's foremost security and economic partners.\textsuperscript{17}

If the Kim regime must worry about the threat from afar, there is an even better reason to fear the near enemy—internal threats to the Kim family's grip on power and the DPRK system. Threats from within could just as easily unseat Kim Jong-un as foreign threats. Questions surrounding attempts to assassinate or overthrow the Kim regime touch on the most sensitive issues within the DPRK, and analysis necessarily remains speculative. One episode occurred in June 1995 amid the famine gripping the nation and devastating the northeast in particular. Leading officers of the Korean People's Army Sixth Corps headquartered in Chongjin plotted a coup d'etat. Sixth Corps Commander Kim Yongchun uncovered the conspiracy, leading to the execution of at least two dozen officers and state officials.\textsuperscript{18} As a result of the attempted insurrection and coup plot, the KPA purged and disbanded the Sixth Corps.\textsuperscript{19}

Another episode, admittedly more ambiguous, occurred in April 2004, when two trains carrying chemicals exploded at a station near Sinuiju on China's border. The North Korean government announced that some 154 people had been killed and more than 1,300 injured. The media did not report that Kim Jong-il had been saved because he had disembarked the train before the station. Another interesting fact is that Kim soon after that confiscated all mobile telephones, including those used by officials.\textsuperscript{20}

Factionalism and political schism, a military coup d'etat, economic failure, and, over time, general ideological contamination are potential challenges to Kim's legitimacy, power, and life—although perceptions of vulnerabilities fluctuate. Invisible biological and chemical threats could arise naturally (for example, from the COVID-19 pandemic) or be delivered by clandestine means, as in Kim's use of VX nerve agent to kill his half-brother, or Russian intelligence services' use of poison to eliminate perceived enemies of the state.\textsuperscript{21} The tyranny that Kim Jong-un inherited a decade ago is a system built on a family personality cult in which the Organization and Guidance Department (OGD) "is the part of the state that sees and knows everything."\textsuperscript{22} The OGD was central to Kim Jong-il's consolidation of power, and it remains a vital institution for Kim
Jong-un’s internal control and understanding of external threats and opportunities.  

External and internal threats may also be mutually reinforcing. International sanctions, blockades, or other measures to strangle North Korea’s economy would promote instability and undoubtedly undermine Kim’s standing at home. Information and cyber operations may foment distrust of senior officials, initiate a power struggle, or even trigger a coup attempt or terror attack. Conversely, offering North Korea economic or information programs that challenge a closed system could end up as “poison carrots” that plant the seeds of subversive ideas or spread general ideological contamination against the Kim family, the party, or even the state. With the 2017 assassination of Kim Jong-nam—reportedly a CIA informant and possible bloodline successor—North Korea may have eliminated the leadership’s main external threat. But external support for another senior figure inside North Korea, such as Kim’s sister, Kim Yo-jong, could be seen as a direct threat to Kim’s legitimacy. In sum, the roster of internal security threats would seem to warrant greater fear from the Kim family than external threats.

It is also possible that Kim’s near-absolute authority may offset these concerns—or not. “Great power involves great responsibility,” said Franklin D. Roosevelt. For autocrats, great power involves great paranoia. The most salient threats to the Kim regime are shown in table 1. The Kim regime must worry about threats near and far. In one sense, that might be a good thing for other countries that might bear the brunt of an armed North Korea emboldened to use its treasured strategic weapons. A North Korean leader preoccupied with internal concerns may be self-deterred from adventurism. An internally secure Kim Il-sung—who had long cultivated a cult of personality and was referred to as the “Great Leader”—resorted to military force on multiple occasions because he calculated that South Koreans and Americans were
politically vulnerable. But an excess degree of fear on the part of the Kim regime might also produce lethal miscalculation or inadvertent escalation. And as China has feared for decades, the greatest danger of conflict on the peninsula could be posed by a weakened North Korea.

Analysis can draw on a long record of North Korean threats and use of lethal force and cyberattacks, which have occurred both when the Kim regime has felt emboldened and when it has been weakened. How the Kim regime perceives threats relates to how it makes threats and uses force—the next section’s subject.
CHAPTER 3. THREATS: THE SEVEN CAMPAIGNS

North Korea’s various threats and use of military force tend to be rational and recognizable in the traditional intellectual framework of security and deterrence theory.28 Although North Korea is an authoritarian state run by a dictator, studies on North Korea and the utility of force suggest that the Kim family regime relies on the same general logic of deterrence and rationality that governs the security calculus of the United States, South Korea, and others. There are also significant distinctions, such as the Kim regime’s embrace of deterrence through threatened escalation rather than proportional retaliation.29 But the existence of nuclear weapons has not prevented North Korea’s periodic resort to the threat or use of force.

The Japanese scholar Narushige Michishita examined eight cases involving the use or threat of force by North Korea between 1966 and 2008. He found that while Kim Il-sung and Kim Jong-il’s thinking evolved over this period, they confined most of their aggression to instances when they thought there would be little or no reprisal.30 Michishita places each incident or series of incidents (a campaign) in its context, analyzing critical factors and repercussions. This framework allows Michishita to construct a continuum of North Korean action, one that moves from military-diplomatic campaigns in 1966–1972, including incidents along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), the daring commando raid on the Blue House, and seizure of the USS Pueblo; to the diplomatic use of limited force in 1973–1982, including the campaign surrounding offshore islands in the West (Yellow) Sea and the ax murder incident at the DMZ; to the rise of terrorism in 1983–1992, including assassination
attempts such as the Rangoon bombing and the shutdown of Korean Air Lines (KAL) 858; to sophisticated military-diplomatic campaigns since 1993, including nuclear brinkmanship and high-level diplomacy.

David Shin, a professor at the US National Intelligence University, reaches similar conclusions about North Korea’s calculus in his comprehensive study covering most of North Korean history. In *Rationality in the North Korean Regime*, published in 2018, Shin marshals a rigorous framework and authoritative analysis of the threat or use of force by North Korea, from the start of the Korean War in 1950 through the 2015 incident along the DMZ in which two South Korean soldiers on patrol were maimed by a landmine deliberately placed in their path.31 He judges the major threats and use of force by the three Kim leaders to be rational acts, albeit with differing rationales. Kim Il-sung sought but failed to reunify the peninsula by force and repeatedly misread US resolve and South Korea’s domestic appetite for revolution. Kim Jong-il had more defensive goals, adopting the title of “Dear Leader” not to upstage his father, now the “Eternal Leader.”32 Kim Jong-il focused on survival during the “arduous march” of post-Cold War famine and successfully combined brinkmanship and diplomacy to reach three nuclear deals, however fleeting in duration. Kim Jong-un has burnished his legitimacy while pursuing the goals of his *byungjin* policy, which seeks simultaneous economic and nuclear-weapon development.

If lethal acts by a North Korean leader can be deemed “logical” or “rational,” however, perhaps logic and rationality are not the most salient indices to apply. Shin checks the “rationality” box of his framework, but his more trenchant analysis delves into the rationale behind each threat or use of force. In assessing North Korea’s rationality, just as in assessing its threat perception, the crucial question is not whether but why. That is, we should not ask whether any particular resort to force is rational or whether a perceived threat actually exists, but why it might be considered rational or actual; we must seek the reasons and the context behind the overall judgment. Exploring a wide variety of authoritative sources may help create a common operational picture of North Korean threat perceptions and severe threat-making and aggressive episodes. But this process may ignore important ambiguities and confine itself to interpretations that fit the agreed-upon framework.

The best analysis—of North Korea and more generally—is sound and free from dogmatism. Being sound analytically requires an accurate view of reality, including the legitimate ambiguity in any situation, and a willingness to update and challenge one’s own beliefs. But it also requires that the analyst not become paralyzed by considering too many possibilities.33 In his study of political expertise, Philip Tetlock references Isaiah Berlin’s classification of experts as either hedgehogs, who know one big thing, or foxes, who know many little things. Tetlock writes: “The dominant danger remains hubris, the mostly hedgehog vice of close-mindedness, of dismissing dissonant possibilities too quickly. But there is also the danger of cognitive chaos, the mostly fox vice of excessive open-mindedness, of seeing too much merit in too many stories.”34

In an attempt to adhere to sound and dogma-free analysis, we should view North Korean threats in context, both as specific cases and as parts of larger patterns. For instance, North Korean attitudes toward using force have evolved along with risk assessments, technologies, and international politics. Dozens of major and minor incidents involving the threat or use of force since 1950 can be analyzed either in isolation or in aggregate as part of a specific campaign.

A campaign is “a series of related military operations aimed at accomplishing strategic and operational objectives within a given time and space.”35 The first year of the Korean War can be dissected into various military campaigns; after that, fighting settled into a stalemate as negotiations for an armistice and prisoner return ensued for another two years. The campaigns included the North Korean invasion on June
25, 1950; a counteroffensive after nearly three months of retreat, resupply, and holding the Pusan Perimeter, in which US-led forces conducted an amphibious assault on Inchon and pushed across the 38th parallel; the crossing of the Yalu River by Chinese troops in October and their drive across the 38th parallel; a UN-force counteroffensive under the command of General Matthew Ridgway and a final offensive by the Chinese in the spring of 1951; and the two-year stalemate before the signing of the armistice.\textsuperscript{36} Thankfully, some campaign plans were never put into action, including a military plan (supported at times by General Douglas MacArthur) to strike China with atomic bombs and lay a radioactive belt across the peninsula’s northern neck.\textsuperscript{37}

However, we can broaden the military concept of a campaign and place North Korea’s use of threat or force into the context of a longer-term national security effort to achieve specific aims. Having failed to unify the peninsula by conventional military power, Kim Il-sung increasingly relied on unconventional forces and assassination attempts to overthrow the South Korean regime. But by the 1990s, Kim Il-sung and then Kim Jong-il began to rely on nuclear brinkmanship, diplomacy, and finally limited lethal force to ensure survival. Under Kim Jong-un, North Korea has used nuclear brinkmanship and summits to ensure survival while advancing the byungjin policy of simultaneous economic and nuclear weapon development.

In the aggregate, North Korea’s resort to threats and the use of force can be organized into at least seven political-military campaigns over the past 70 years.\textsuperscript{38} As Kim Jong-un deals with his third American president (after Obama and Trump), Pyongyang may embark on an eighth campaign that borrows past campaigns’ elements yet is distinctive.

The seven political-military campaigns described below can explain North Korean threats and uses of force. Emerging from a broad reading of North Korean behavior, they include (1) the offensive use of conventional military force in the Korean War (1950–1953); (2) the use of special operations along with the limited use of conventional force on North Korea’s periphery (1965–1970); (3) the lower-intensity use of both conventional and unconventional force on North Korean frontiers and against Seoul with specific political goals in mind (1973–1981); (4) the use of assassination and terror attacks (1983–1987); (5) nuclear brinkmanship and diplomacy (1993–2008); (6) the use of limited lethal force to heighten fear while building nuclear and missile programs (2010–2016); and (7) the return to nuclear brinkmanship and summit diplomacy (2017–2020).

**First Campaign**

The first and most aggressive campaign involved a surprise conventional military offensive to unify the peninsula by force. In launching the Korean War, Kim Il-sung convinced Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong that South Korean troops were ill prepared, and that the United States would lack the political fortitude to fight a new foreign war. Kim’s gamble almost succeeded. Holding onto the Pusan Perimeter on South Korea’s southeastern tip, the Eighth Army lasted long enough for reinforcements to arrive. North Korea might have succeeded, but Kim Il-sung underestimated US determination to defend South Korea. Partly this was a failure to understand that Washington would view the aggression not as a local war but as a proxy war in the embryonic Cold War against Communist powers in Moscow and Beijing.

North Korea’s setback forced China to intervene, but both Beijing and Washington settled for a stalemate. The Chinese intervention demonstrated both the escalatory dangers of force and major-power aversion to initiating a direct conflict between major powers.\textsuperscript{39} In the end, China ensured North Korea would survive, but no more than that. The war settled into a deadlock in 1951, and the use of force after that occurred amid the backdrop of protracted efforts to negotiate a truce.

Once Kim Il-sung unleashed war, North Koreans suffered immensely. The United States was determined to muster
as much muscle as possible to punish aggression and end the conflict on favorable terms. Particularly terrifying was the “indiscriminate targeting of population centres from the air,” which “would leave a . . . profound impression on the North Korean nation.”40 The war broke out just five years after the United States had dropped atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima to halt the horrific Pacific War. North Koreans had good reason to be frightened by “commanders, congressmen and other prominent figures” calling for “escalation through the employment of nuclear arms to subdue Korean and Chinese resistance. Such calls were common following US battlefield setbacks throughout the war, and at times were responded to, bringing America very close to launching nuclear attacks.”41 The dropping of some 650,000 tons of bombs on North Korea left an indelible mark on North Korea’s collective leadership.42 North Korea’s one-sided reporting of the war’s horrors, regardless of whether they were fabricated or embellished, became part of the Kim family narrative and were unquestioned by the North Korean people.

Among the unintended consequences of the Korean War were three instructive lessons. First, North Korea learned that it is unwise to engage a superior conventional military power in a confrontation even with an element of surprise. Second, Pyongyang saw that it was easier for the United States to feign potential use of nuclear weapons than to use them. Over time, America’s growing nuclear arsenal would appear even more of a paper tiger. But the United States was not only self-deterred from breaking the postwar nuclear taboo; it was also deterred by North Korea, whose third lesson was the immense deterrent value of nuclear weapons. Any country possessing nuclear weapons might prevent an attack from outside powers, including the United States. This final lesson was important not just for the founder of the DPRK but also for his son and perhaps even more so for his grandson, Kim Jong-un. The discovery of North Korea’s nuclear program in 1984 nevertheless came as a surprise and has been called the “longest-running intelligence failure in the history of American espionage.”43

Second Campaign
In the mid-1960s to early 1970s, North Korea embarked on a second political-military campaign to destabilize South Korea and produce forceful unification while simultaneously raising barriers to US intervention. Unlike the Korean War bid, which used conventional military force, the second campaign relied on covert operations, commando raids, special operations, and more aggressive coastal and air defense. With the United States and South Korea increasingly committed to fighting in Vietnam, the North Korean regime saw heightened vulnerability within South Korea’s autocratic Park Chung-hee government and questioned the extent of America’s political support for its costly forward-deployed forces in Asia. If Ho Chi Minh could wage a guerrilla insurgency or people’s war in Southeast Asia, why couldn’t the Kim regime instigate a guerrilla insurgency on the peninsula?44 American conventional military power might be caught in a quagmire—unable to achieve victory even if not necessarily beaten on the battlefield. In the event, a guerrilla campaign gradually exposed the limited US political will to fight and its ally’s political weaknesses.

North Korea saw that it could raise US forces’ costs engaged in routine surveillance operations near and over the peninsula. Kim Il-sung may have felt threatened by US naval and air operations on North Korea’s periphery and may have concluded that North Korea’s partners in Moscow and Beijing would not object to attempts to prevent the United States from conducting intrusive surveillance missions. This backstory explains why the Kim regime embarked on a second campaign to achieve its ambitious unification goals on North Korean terms. But whereas the first campaign was carried out through a conventional attack, the second campaign relied on indirect and covert means. Specifically, the second assault included commando raids to assassinate President Park and throw South Korea into political turmoil and more aggressive coastal and air defenses designed to keep US forces at bay and weaken the alliance.
Commando raids included various assaults on the DMZ and Joint Security Area in 1966, the attempted assassination of President Park in the Blue House raid and infiltration operations in Uljin and Samcheok on the South Korean east coast in 1968, and an assassination attempt on President Park in 1970. Aggressive air and naval defense incidents included a North Korean MiG-17 fighter attack on a US Air Force RB-47H reconnaissance aircraft in the Sea of Japan in 1965; the sinking of a South Korean patrol craft PCEC-56 by North Korean coastal artillery fire in 1967; the capture of the USS

North Korea's Seven Military Campaigns

The threat and use of force is an enduring feature of relations with North Korea. Because conflict with Pyongyang is more a continuum than a series of incidents, this timeline highlights fundamental shifts in how the three Kim leaders resorted to threats or lethal uses of force in the past 70 years. The dates, while subjective, illustrate the most active period of seven political-military campaigns. The question now is whether Kim Jong-un will take an eighth twist in North Korea's approach to the United States and South Korea.

First Campaign (1950-1953)
Kim Il-sung's deadly gamble to unify the peninsula by force nearly succeeded. In less than three months after launching a surprise offensive, North Korean troops pinned US and South Korean forces to a tiny foothold inside the Pusan Perimeter. But Kim underestimated US political will to defend the Republic of Korea. The United States mobilized international support, brandished superior conventional firepower, and threatened an atomic attack. When the war ended, Kim knew he needed to pursue his ambitions in more indirect and unconventional ways.

Second Campaign (1965-1970)
In 1968, 15 years after the Korean War Armistice, Kim Il-sung dispatched 31 commandos to infiltrate South Korea to assassinate President Park Chung-hee in the Blue House and trigger an uprising. But the special forces were halted a few hundred meters from the president's executive office and residence, Cheongwadae. Dozens were killed or wounded, and most of the commandos died while seeking to flee. Only one North Korean soldier, Kim Shin-jo, was captured alive, and he lives in Seoul today under an assumed identity.

Third Campaign (1973-1981)
In 1976, two American soldiers were killed and many more injured in a melee started by North Korean soldiers determined to stop the chopping down of a poplar tree obstructing UN forces' view across the DMZ. In response to the "ax murder," US and South Korean forces conducted Operation Paul Bunyan—the most heavily defended tree-cutting mission in history. The operation was one of the clearest—and few—US-ROK forces' attempts to signal their readiness to die to carry out a specific mission opposed by North Korea.

Photo Caption: United States' Marines use scaling ladders to climb the shore cliffs at Inchon, Korea following Kim Il-sung's surprise offensive, at the start of the Korean War. (Corbis via Getty Images)

Photo Caption: A view of the Blue House, or presidential mansion in Seoul, South Korea in 2019. The Blue House is the site of Kim Il-sung's failed attempt to assassinate President Park Chung-hee in 1968. (Tristan Surtel/ Wikimedia Commons)

Photo Caption: The axe used in the North Korean soldiers' attack on American soldiers at the DMZ in 1976 that prompted the most heavily defended tree-cutting mission by US military in history. (Mark Edward Harris/Getty Images)
FEAR AND INSECURITY: ADDRESSING NORTH KOREAN THREAT PERCEPTIONS

Pueblo and attacks on US air surveillance in 1968; and the MiG-21 shoot down of a US Navy EC-121M aircraft in 1969. This is not an exhaustive list, and other uses or threats of force occurred both before and after this period. But the 1965–1970 period stands apart as a separate campaign—undertaken for similar reasons as the Korean War, but with various means and a changing international environment. The most daring resort to force was the commando raid on the South Korean presidential residence, the Blue House, to assassinate President Park and

Fourth Campaign (1983-1987)

North Korea committed one of its most deadly terrorist attacks when South Korean officials gathered at a shrine in Yangon (formerly Rangoon) for a ceremony honoring Burmese independence fighters. The 1983 Rangoon bombing killed four Burmese and 17 South Koreans, including four cabinet ministers and two top aides to President Chun Doo-hwan, whose late arrival spared his life.

Photo Caption: A South Korean wreath is laid to rest next to Myanmar’s Martyrs Mausoleum, during a memorial in Yangon on June 6, 2014. The Mausoleum was the site of a North Korean bombing in 1983. (Ye Aung Thu/AFP via Getty Images)

Fifth Campaign (1993-2008)

During the first nuclear crisis with North Korea, the United States probably came close to a potential preemptive strike on North Korea’s nuclear reactor located at the sprawling Yongbyon nuclear facility 60 miles north of Pyongyang. The episode initiated a series of subsequent nuclear and missile crises in which Pyongyang’s nuclear brinkmanship have led to sanctions and diplomacy, but not major military attacks.

Photo Caption: In this satellite image the Yongbyon nuclear facility is seen on May 14, 2009 in Yongbyon, North Korea. (DigitalGlobe/Getty Images)

Sixth Campaign (2010-2016)

It took several months, but an international panel of experts proved beyond a reasonable doubt that a North Korean torpedo sank the South Korean corvette ROKS Cheonan while on patrol near the Northern Limit Line on March 26, 2010. Half of the crew perished in North Korea’s deadliest resort to lethal force since the 1970s.

Photo Caption: A view of the memorial dedicated to the Republic of Korea navy corvette ROKS Cheonan (PCC 772) at Pyeongtaek Naval Base. The ship was sunk by a North Korean torpedo on March 26, 2010. (US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Peter D. Lawlor/Released)

Seventh Campaign (2017-2020)

Kim Jong-un’s determination to field an ICBM that can strike the United States seems undiminished by the high-level diplomacy of 2018 and 2019. In October 2020, marking the 75th anniversary of the ruling Korean Workers’ Party, North Korea paraded a Hwasong-16 missile that could be the world’s largest road-mobile ICBM.

Photo Caption: The Hwasong-16 missile displayed in the parade of the 75th Anniversary of the Korean Worker’s Party. (MinhKhuuhuman/Wikimedia Commons)
throw the country into chaos; two days later, a US spy ship operating just outside North Korean waters was taken hostage.

The preparation required to make a serious assault on South Korea’s government seat appears to have been long in the making. The commandos conducting the Blue House raid were part of Unit 124, a special forces unit established in 1966, very likely inspired by North Vietnam’s insurgency and guerrilla operations. The mission planning included exercising on a mock-up of the presidential residence before 31 commandos slipped across the DMZ around midnight on January 17, 1968. Just before 10 p.m. on January 21, as the commandos came within a few hundred meters of the Blue House, South Korean police demanded documents from the soldiers, who claimed to be a South Korean counterintelligence command unit returning from training. Gunfire ensued, and 27 of the commandos were killed either at the scene or attempting to escape to North Korea. One soldier, Pak Jae-gyong, managed to return to North Korea, where he would rise to become a four-star general in the North Korean military. One commando was captured but died by suicide; another, Kim Shin-jo, survived, served time, and lives in Seoul under a false name. The fate of the 31st soldier remains unknown. Meanwhile, some 31 South Korean soldiers and police officers and five civilians were killed; more than 50 people were wounded, including three American soldiers.45

The failed Blue House raid was not the last time North Korea attempted a decapitation strike on South Korea’s president. But the inability to ignite a revolution dampened Kim Il-sung’s enthusiasm for achieving unification by armed force—even if that dream carried on into the 1980s.46

If the Blue House raid made the Kim regime more cautious about the use of force, the USS Pueblo incident offered different lessons. On January 23, 1968, North Korean patrol boats seized USS Pueblo, a US Navy intelligence ship, in international waters off Wonsan and took all 83 crew members hostage. Secretary of State Dean Rusk called the incident “a matter of the utmost gravity.” North Korea’s action took an enormous human toll on the captured crew and their families, who only recently were awarded $2.3 billion in damages.47 From a larger national security perspective, the subsequent lack of a military reprisal may have taught the North Koreans that they could commit brazen coercive acts without necessarily facing punishment. Above all, US decision-makers viewed the Pueblo’s seizure through the prism of Vietnam policy and not primarily as an inter-Korean conflict.48 For the Johnson administration, the capture of a virtually unarmed intelligence vessel was a gambit to divert US attention from the Vietnam war, sap America’s political will, and dampen its appetite for embarking on another East Asian conflict. As an editorial in the New York Times cautioned, “Remembering the Gulf of Tonkin, Americans would be wise to keep cool and not leap to conclusions—as some members of Congress have already done—about the North Korean capture of the American naval intelligence ship Pueblo yesterday.”49 Combined with other forceful actions in the name of defending sovereignty, North Korea warned the new Nixon administration that it risked war should it begin escorting reconnaissance planes. The threat came after a North Korean shootdown of an EC-121 naval reconnaissance plane on April 15, 1969, Kim’s birthday.50 The incident killed all 31 US crew members, yet North Korea went on the political offensive, demanding all American troops withdraw from the peninsula. The lethal provocation caught US officials unprepared because they had difficulty identifying “North Korea’s serious threats” when they “were intermingled among strings of empty bluster.”51 That event and subsequent North Korean raids across the DMZ offered North Korea’s leadership ideas about how to drive a wedge into the US-ROK alliance in the future—whether after the Cold War in the early 1990s, after 9/11, or after President Trump indicated his desire to bring US troops home as soon as possible.

The trigger for North Korea’s decision to resort to significant force, whether conventional or unconventional, appears to be a calculation about South Korean volatility and American hesitancy. At any rate, this calculation seems to have been made in both
the first and second campaigns involving major lethal force. In retrospect, these calculations were wrong. Furthermore, Kim Il-sung knew that external aggression—and internal aggression in the form of purges—could strengthen his cult of personality and quash factionalism within North Korea. But it also seems true that perceptions of ROK and alliance weakness prompted deadly intervention from Pyongyang. During the first three decades after the Korean War, the Kim family was driven toward a vision of unification through revolution; over the past three decades or so, Pyongyang’s aggression has been driven more out of fear.

Third Campaign
North Korea’s second campaign metamorphosed into a separate, third campaign, executed throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s. Narushige Michishita rightly notes Pyongyang’s improved ability during this period to link limited uses of force to a diplomatic strategy. Low-intensity attacks and even one more assassination attempt were part of an effort to continue inciting a revolution that might unify the peninsula. But the short-term aims centered on probing weak links in the US-ROK alliance and driving US forces off the peninsula—adding momentum to America’s retreatrenchment after the Vietnam War.

North Korea turned up the pressure on its maritime frontier, escalating a dispute over small but strategically located islands administered by South Korea in the West (Yellow) Sea. The five islands—Yonpyong, Paenggyong, Taechong, Sochong, and U—had been used extensively to stage special operations during the Korean War. Not coincidentally, the maritime campaign took place alongside growing student demonstrations inside South Korea. Following repeated threatening sail-bys from North Korean gunboats, on December 1, 1973, North Korea abruptly claimed territorial sovereignty over the five islands straddling the Northern Limit Line (NLL). At the Military Armistice Commission in Panmunjom, North Korean Major General Kim Pung-sop announced that South Korean vessels would now need its permission to sail to waters around the five islands. The disputed NLL would spark even more lethal uses of force in 2002 and 2010. Indeed, one South Korean Army colonel, analyzing the strategic value of the islands, concluded a 2009 research study with these prophetic words: “The DPRK will continuously try to nullify the NLL. Therefore, the ROK should be vigilant to maintain the NLL until a mutually agreed maritime demarcation line between the two Koreas is set.”

South Korea’s roiling democratic protest movement undoubtedly encouraged North Korea to make another attempt on President Park’s life on Liberation Day (August 15) in 1974. As Park delivered a Liberation Day speech in a packed National Theater in Seoul, a bullet struck and killed his wife, Yuk Young-soo. Suspected North Korean agents may have used the confessed shooter, Mun Se Kwang, a Korean resident of Japan, to deepen distrust between South Koreans and the Japanese.

In August 1976, North Korean soldiers killed two US soldiers assigned to chop down a poplar tree blocking the UN Command forces’ view of the Military Demarcation Line. The “ax murder” incident was considered preplanned; it led the United States to order its nuclear forces to high alert (DEFCON 3) and resulted in a rare major military response that could have escalated: Operation Paul Bunyan. It also embodied the kind of “whiplash” and “sudden lurching from dialogue to belligerence and back again” that came to characterize the standoff on the Korean peninsula. But Operation Paul Bunyan was also the last time the United States appeared unmistakably determined to use military force if necessary, and the objective—of cutting down a single 80-foot tree—was one North Korea could accept. Although, according to one observer, the incident pushed the United States and North Korea “closer to war than at any point since the 1953 armistice,” that conclusion does not stand up to more critical thinking about Kim Il-sung’s interests and intentions. The allies understood North Korea was not interested in fighting another Korean War, and the mobilization of a credible military force to achieve a limited goal reinforced deterrence rather than nearly triggering a war.
North Korea’s attempts to assert itself on its frontiers would continue, including an attempted shootdown of an SR-71 “Blackbird” strategic reconnaissance aircraft in international airspace over the Yellow Sea in 1981. But as time passed after Operation Paul Bunyan’s convincing show of force, future American threats would gradually lose their credibility and capacity to provoke awe.

**Fourth Campaign**

North Korea’s fourth campaign of force was distinguished by terrorism, apparently reflecting Kim Jong-il’s desire to burnish his authority in Pyongyang. Between 1983 and 1987, North Korean operatives made another assassination attempt on the South Korean president and, on two occasions, used bombs to disrupt international athletic competitions hosted by Seoul.

In 1983, President Chun Doo-hwan led a sizeable official delegation to Burma, where he was set to lay a wreath at a shrine for martyrs killed in the 1947 fight for independence. The remotely controlled bombs planted by North Korean agents killed 17 South Koreans, including four cabinet ministers. Still, President Chun’s life was spared because of a scheduling snafu and a late decision to allow his wife’s delegation to arrive first. If the terror attack had aimed to strengthen Kim Jong-il’s hand, it might have mattered little that North Korea had failed yet again to hit its primary target. However, the bombings had been designed to spoil South Korea’s moment in the global spotlight, as South Korea was expanding its influence in Southeast Asia. Three years later, a North Korean bomb ripped through Gimpo Airport, killing five and injuring dozens as teams arrived for the 1986 Asian Games. The following year, operatives used a bomb made with liquid explosives and a detonator to destroy KAL 858 in midair on its way from Baghdad to Seoul, killing all 115 aboard the plane. Although the 1988 Summer Olympics were still months away, the terrorist attack on KAL 858 appeared designed to sabotage Seoul’s bid to host a successful event.

Kim Jong-il put his signature on the use of force in this fourth campaign. Because he appeared to care more about spectacle than revolution, the use of deadly force was administered with plausible deniability and minimal chance of an immediate and punishing reprisal; the goal was to cripple South Korea’s role in regional and world affairs. He failed. Indeed, the 1988 Summer Olympics followed the first democratic presidential election in South Korea, and the ROK was on the rise. At the same time, North Korea was about to face multiple setbacks—losing Cold War patronage, losing its founding leader, and dealing with the onset of famine and economic failure. The 1990s would require a different approach to using force, and this decade saw the beginning of nuclear brinkmanship that survives to this day.

As explained below, North Korea’s fifth, sixth, and seventh campaigns elevated both diplomacy and the military stakes to the highest level. Special envoys and summit-level meetings became more routine in the past three decades, and throughout the entire period, nuclear weapons loomed large. But these campaigns are distinct from one another in significant ways, too.

**Fifth Campaign**

The fifth campaign coincided with Kim Jong-il’s rise to power and continued for a significant period, at least until he suffered a severe stroke in 2008. After the Soviet Union’s dissolution, Kim Il-sung negotiated historic North-South agreements that promised both nonaggression and denuclearization. The December 1991 Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the South and the North pledged that both parties “shall not use force against each other and shall not undertake armed aggression against each other.” The January 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula called on both sides not to “test, manufacture, produce, receive, process, store, deploy or use nuclear weapons” or to “possess nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities.” Both of these agreements were violated and tested in the months and years to follow, and yet they still stand as beacons for a more hopeful future.
The 1993–1994 nuclear crisis may have represented the most severe period during which the United States contemplated a preemptive strike on the Yongbyon nuclear facility and North Korea’s nascent nuclear weapon program.70 In 1993, a classified CIA National Intelligence Estimate concluded that North Korea probably already possessed one or two nuclear weapons.71 The Kim family was undoubtedly concerned about its survival because the end of the Cold War denied it the kind of patronage from Beijing and Moscow that it had come to expect. Withdrawal of this patronage accelerated the breakdown of the public distribution system and created a need for new external investment sources.

But Kim Jong-il’s substantial influence could also help explain Pyongyang’s truculence before reaching a US-DPRK Agreed Framework in 1994. Indeed, the second Kim reverted to nuclear brinkmanship throughout his time as chairman of the Korean Workers’ Party. Although Kim Jong-il adopted a policy of “military-first politics” (songbun), he acted more out of fear and weakness than confidence and strength. Kim Il-sung had long thought South Korea susceptible to revolution and the United States short on resolution. Still, the United States and South Korea now began to underestimate the Kim regime’s staying power in the first two decades after the Cold War.

Kim rebuffed the George W. Bush administration when confronted with evidence that North Korea had been circumventing the Agreed Framework with a covert highly enriched uranium (HEU) processing program.72 In the first decade of this century, Kim Jong-il oscillated between threatening to punish the United States and wanting top-level meetings (including North-South summits in 2000 and 2007), and between pledging to denuclearize and promising to become a permanent nuclear-weapon state.

North Korean threats were used primarily defensively to constrain outside pressure. After all, the George W. Bush administration employed its version of what was later dubbed “maximum pressure” by exploiting the 9/11 environment. The 2002 State of the Union Address singled out North Korea as part of an “axis of evil,” and following the Iraq invasion in 2003, there was an implicit threat that “shock and awe” might be coming to Pyongyang.73 As US forces became bogged down in intractable stability operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, the danger of the US military attack was supplanted by a ratcheting up of economic pressure. A wide-ranging Illicit Activities Initiative culminated in a powerful demonstration of financial measures. In September 2005, the US Treasury Department employed the USA Patriot Act section 311 to designate the Macau-based Banco Delta Asia as a “primary money laundering concern,” triggering a run on the small bank and compelling Chinese authorities to freeze roughly $25 million in North Korean funds.74 But actors have a way of circumventing pressure, as North Korea’s first nuclear test in 2006 might suggest.

**Sixth Campaign**

The sixth political-military campaign, which featured new threats and uses of force, lasted from about 2010 until 2016. By 2009, with President Barack Obama’s inauguration, the United States was mired in two foreign insurgencies. Kim Jong-il was convalescing from a stroke, and Kim Jong-un needed to burnish his credentials as the successor to his father. The third Kim had big ambitions and saw new opportunities. He wanted to advance North Korea’s arsenal of nuclear weapons and missiles, and the testing of both was accelerated. Kim was willing to risk using limited lethal force to send a signal to South Korea and hopefully drive a wedge between Seoul and a war-weary Washington. And he was ready to go beyond past unconventional warfare by using a wider assortment of tools, including surprise attacks with limited force, cyberattack, and the murder of relatives, specifically the use of VX nerve agent to assassinate his half-brother, who represented a rare potential threat to his power. Diplomacy was also part of the motivation for these actions, although that, for the most part, would wait until the end of 2017. During this sixth campaign, there were no summit meetings but plenty of events.
Notably, North Korea during this period used deadly force twice: in the sinking of the South Korean corvette on patrol near the NLL, and the shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, both in 2010. North Korea also scuttled an early deal with the United States that had been under discussion before Kim Jong-il’s death in December 2011. Although Kim Jong-un initially accepted a Leap Day agreement to freeze nuclear and missile testing, he quickly proceeded to violate the spirit of the accord by announcing his intention to launch a satellite. Kim the “Great Successor” and the “Young General” soon sought to establish his credentials as a “bigger, badder, and bolder” dictator. Kim Jong-un proceeded to deploy IRBMs (intermediate-range ballistic missiles) capable of striking some US targets and threatened merciless attacks in 2013. His cyberattack on Sony Pictures in 2014—occurring before Sony could release a comedy about Kim’s assassination—demonstrated that his regime was willing to mete out costly penalties for those mocking the Kim family. Further, North Korea’s illicit online activities have only expanded in recent years, with the US government accusing Pyongyang of trying to steal some $1.3 billion through cybertheft. And a landmine incident that maimed two South Korean soldiers on patrol again demonstrated Kim’s desire to walk to the brink of conflict, buoyed by a reasonable degree of confidence that the United States and South Korea would be more risk-averse for fear of escalation.

Seventh Campaign

The seventh campaign under Kim Jong-un was on full display in 2017 and 2018, followed by more circumspection and nuclear buildup since then. There is no need to recount this recent ground. Suffice it to say that Kim went all-out to acquire an ICBM capability early in the Trump administration. Although byungjin was the policy, Kim was sequencing the nuclear buildup before cashing in on economic development. The Trump administration responded with maximum pressure, but pressure aimed at persuading Kim that he didn’t need nuclear weapons and that nuclear weapons didn’t make North Korea safer. US threats of a limited strike or “bloody nose” were reciprocated with creative and vitriolic propaganda from North Korea. But the Trump administration sought to escalate to catalyze diplomacy; the goal was to compel Kim to choose diplomacy and give up his nuclear insurance to bring about a brighter economic future for his country. Kim had a different idea: he would become a permanent nuclear-weapon state and then sue for peace on his terms.

National Security Adviser H. R. McMaster, who worked to develop a realistic strategy for convincing Kim to trade in nuclear weapons for diplomacy, later described “the cycle of North Korean provocation, feigned conciliation, extortion, concession, promulgation of a weak agreement, and the inevitable violation of that agreement”—a cycle that in his view “actually encouraged the North’s aggression.”

Trump’s threat of “fire and fury” was part of this strategy to pressure Kim Jong-un to the negotiating table. President Obama had warned Trump about the danger of North Korea acquiring an operational ICBM. Kim conducted his country’s sixth and largest (apparently hydrogen) nuclear test on September 3, 2017. Trump let McMaster know that “Pyongyang [should] first feel the consequences of its actions” before being offered a diplomatic off-ramp. At the end of November 2017, Kim declared he had achieved his military goals—presumably of a workable ICBM—and was now prepared for diplomacy. The US Defense Intelligence Agency and open source Chinese assessments variously judged North Korea’s November 2017 test of the Hwasong-15 ICBM to have “demonstrated a capability to reach the United States” and to be the North’s “first real ICBM.” In December 2017, back-channel talks in Pyongyang achieved no concrete progress, but they did presage an unprecedented period of diplomatic engagement with North Korea.

North-South summits raised expectations of a breakthrough and the dream that an armistice regime would soon be replaced with a peace regime. The Singapore summit, held in June 2018
FEAR AND INSECURITY: ADDRESSING NORTH KOREAN THREAT PERCEPTIONS

and the first ever between a sitting US president and the North Korean leader, offered a general outline for future diplomacy: establish new political relations, build a peace regime, work toward denuclearization, and continue repatriation of POW/MIA remains.\textsuperscript{87} A moratorium on nuclear and long-range missile testing, as well as a reduction of US-ROK military drills, was the main tangible result of the at-times frenetic diplomacy that followed. The dream of a peaceful, denuclearized peninsula was put on hold when President Trump and Kim Jong-un left Hanoi in early 2019 without a deal or further talks planned. For the most part, diplomacy remained deadlocked, with none of the three main parties willing to do anything overt to end diplomatic hope. In his memoir, National Security Advisor John Bolton describes both the Singapore and Hanoi summits. In Singapore, when President Trump told Chairman Kim that Bolton would be visiting Pyongyang, Kim replied, "You may find this hard to answer, but do you think you can trust me?"\textsuperscript{88} After Hanoi, perhaps Kim knew the answer to the question. What the Hanoi summit showed, Bolton concluded while flying back to Washington, "was that the U.S. still didn’t know how to deal with North Korea and its ilk. We spend endless hours negotiating with ourselves."\textsuperscript{89}

Since the Hanoi summit, North Korea has conducted tests of shorter-range, solid-fuel rockets (the KN-23, KN-24, and KN-25), displayed on parade two new SLBMs (\textit{Pukguksong-4} and \textit{Pukguksong-5}) and a huge road-mobile ICBM (\textit{Hwasong-16}).\textsuperscript{90} At the Eighth Congress of the Korean Workers’ Party in January 2021, Kim Jong-un assumed the new title of General Secretary, focused on the state’s role in the economy and announced new ambitions for North Korea’s mass destruction weapons: smaller, faster, longer-range missiles would be complemented with new space and cyber capabilities.\textsuperscript{91} In his inauguration speech days later, President Biden announced he would “repair our alliances and engage with the world once again," adding that the United States would be “a strong, trusted partner for peace, progress, and security.”\textsuperscript{92} Biden has assembled an experienced team of experts with a focus on China and the Indo-Pacific region. In the coming months, the question is what, if anything, the United States, working with South Korea, Japan, and others, can do to contain North Korea’s nuclear weapons and military forces. White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki answered a question about North Korea in one of her first meetings with the press:

The President’s view is, of course, that it is without question that North Korea's nuclear ballistic missile and other proliferation-related activities constitute a serious threat to the international peace and security of the world and undermine the global nonproliferation regime. And we have—still have a vital interest in deterring North Korea—as does Japan, of course. We will adopt a new strategy to keep the American people and our allies safe. That approach will begin with a thorough policy review of the state of play in North Korea, in close consultation with South Korea, Japan, and other allies on ongoing pressure options and the potential for any future diplomacy.\textsuperscript{93}

Given that Kim Jong-un has greeted the Biden administration with a pledge to build up his nuclear arsenal further, might North Korea be embarking on an eighth campaign? If so, how might it differ from what has gone before, and how can the United States and South Korea address threat perceptions and provide security assurances as part of diplomatic engagement with Pyongyang? It may be helpful to extrapolate from these historical and recent case studies. In addition, the next section offers a few guidelines for future interactions with North Korea, derived from open-source materials and discussions with leading American and South Korean experts.
North Korean threat perceptions and attitudes to using force are means to more comprehensive security policy ends. A richer appreciation of how Americans and Koreans think about these issues can inform the perennial questions that dog North Korean policy. For instance, David Kang and Victor Cha point to three “enduring and interrelated” questions: “First, to what extent are North Korea’s foreign and domestic policies motivated primarily by internal versus external factors? . . . Second, is North Korea strong or weak? . . . Third, to what extent is North Korea predictable or unpredictable?”94 While this section deals with a slightly different set of questions, they are intertwined with the trio of enduring questions identified by Kang and Cha.

To be understood, North Korea’s threat perceptions and uses of force ultimately must be placed into the context of Kim Jong-un’s intentions. It is difficult enough to keep on top of Kim’s largely concealed strategic capabilities; it is next to impossible to fully grasp his motives at any particular moment. Even so, some broad truths are discernable, and three, in particular, stand out.

First, expecting rapid change with North Korea is likely to be disappointing. Even if leaders or negotiators could manage a

---

Photo Caption: This undated picture released by North Korea’s official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) on September 3, 2017 shows North Korean leader Kim Jong-un looking at a metal casing with two bulges at an undisclosed location. North Korea has developed a hydrogen bomb which can be loaded into the country’s new intercontinental ballistic missile, the official Korean Central News Agency claimed on September 3. (AFP PHOTO/KCNA via KNS)
meaningful diplomatic breakthrough, implementing that deal would be the more difficult part. Distrust is too deep and conflicting interests too difficult to disentangle, while the asymmetry of systems and types of power makes quick deal-making unlikely. There is no substitute for hard work and slow progress—for three steps forward, two steps backward. But expectations should be tempered. As one North Korean expert advises, “talks, and compromises and exchanges are necessary,” but the possibilities for reconciliation are “very, very tight. The actual goal is to establish a sensible and mild variety of the Cold War regime.”

Second, at least for now, Kim Jong-un aspires to retain nuclear weapons and remove sanctions to allow North Korea to expand its economic development and modernize. Whether at some distant point that maximalist ambition will change cannot be known, but appreciating those objectives helps to place threats and use of force in context, as well as dampen expectations about finding common diplomatic ground. It narrows space for diplomacy, but perhaps it also points to more straightforward tasks of seeking political understanding and slowly building confidence and crisis management mechanisms.

Finally, Kim remains risk-tolerant—or at least is likely to continue to enjoy the perception of being less risk-averse than democratic governments in Washington and Seoul. As this report has shown, North Korea has pursued an evolving variety of political-military campaigns involving the use or threat of force. The main lesson offered by the vast majority of them is that the US-ROK alliance is unlikely to impose direct military costs in response to those measures. The risk-averse nature of democracies with much to lose from a potential nuclear war is known, whereas the Kim family regime has always been willing to show a bit more risk acceptance. But it remains bounded risk acceptance, and with that knowledge, alliance managers should be able to preserve deterrence confidently and advance diplomacy.

What are the implications of North Korean threat perceptions for diplomacy? First, diplomacy should prioritize building a more stable relationship with North Korea rather than placing denuclearization at center stage. Second, there should be no rush to summits unless there is a lower-level agreement that would guarantee a successful leaders’ meeting. Third, horizontal cooperation on a broad agenda of shared interests beyond nuclear weapons should be pursued. Fourth, new exchanges for information, particularly for crisis management, should be created. In short, the US and South Korea should engage North Korea as much as possible but take time reaching conclusions. However, this advice is easier for a new Biden administration to consider than for a Moon administration in its last year in office.

What are the implications of North Korean threat perceptions for maintaining deterrence and escalating and de-escalating a crisis? Even for realists who tend to think that the best defense is a good offense, injecting new weapons—nuclear-armed missiles and cyber and space systems—is hardly a guarantee of future peace and stability. Inherent dangers remain, and perceptions and misperceptions may accentuate them. Indeed, “misperception now ingrained in the US–North Korean relationship may interact with a situation that is already unfolding to invite a catastrophe that neither side wants.” But these concerns need not apply to US efforts to strengthen the ROK armed forces by improving South Korea’s missile capabilities, deepening maritime cooperation, holding regular exercises, and conducting joint research and development in innovative technology areas. North Korea has the means of deterring outside intervention, but South Korea must continue to improve its ability to deter North Korean aggression.

What are the implications for North Korea’s nuclear disarmament? For Kim Jong-un, as for his father and grandfather, nuclear weapons are a “bulwark against attempts at forcible regime change or outside interference in North Korean decision-making.” But even as these weapons serve the strategic end goal of supporting regime survival, Pyongyang retains a
choice over nuclear posture. Although North Korea may be attempting to acquire its triad of land-, air-, and sea-based strategic weapons to permit an assured retaliation nuclear force posture, Pyongyang currently approximates the Pakistan model of asymmetric escalation designed to deter intervention from a superior adversary.99

But North Korea’s asymmetric escalation nuclear force posture is intentionally aggressive and inherently dangerous. Kim Jong-un’s “threat of pre-emptive first use whose threshold is ambiguous” aims to make the idea of US and allied military intervention “unthinkable.”100 Cyber and electronic warfare or drone attack on Kim’s nuclear command and control infrastructure may be the surest way to prevent a nuclear attack from North Korea.101 It is nearly impossible to fathom the security calculations Pyongyang would make to preempt that preventive action. However, far from being ready to abandon nuclear weapons, the third Kim is poised to refine them and strengthen secure communications and command and control.102

The predominant US policy goal vis-à-vis North Korea must be to manage the risk of nuclear war.103 The good news is that Kim appears open to arms control, just not deep nuclear disarmament. To ensure stability on the peninsula, the United States, South Korea, and others should consider steps that avoid triggering a nuclear exchange. The question is how much to reward North Korea for remaining a nuclear power. North Korea’s acquiescence to what Professor Siegfried Hecker dubbed the “Three NOS”—no new weapons, no better weapons, and no transfer of technology or weapons—would help stabilize the peninsula.104 But while avoiding nuclear war is the priority, it is not the only objective; moreover, providing sanctions relief and investment, scaling back military exercises or deployments, and signing nonaggression accords and peace treaties will not necessarily advance the avoidance of nuclear war beyond far more parsimonious concessions. By announcing grand plans for bolstering strategic weapons at the Eighth Party Congress, Kim has created a win-win situation from his perspective: he can afford constraints if properly rewarded; and if his expectations are not met, he gets to augment his status within the club of nuclear powers.
CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION: THREAT PERCEPTIONS AND THE ALLIANCE

If the Korean Peninsula is to move away from the nuclear brink and transition from an armistice regime to a peace regime, then the United States and South Korea will have to find a way to deal with North Korea’s perceptions of threat and the utility of force. Allies should begin with the presumption that Kim Jong-un “sees the possession of nuclear weapons as vital to achieving the development of North Korea’s economy and cementing his country’s strategic relevance and autonomy.” With that shared understanding in mind, it should be possible to preserve deterrence, manage crises, and find modest diplomatic steps, including security assurances, for engaging the DPRK. Even these assumptions require some risk and need to be made with a caveat. Judging intent is more of a mystery to be framed than a puzzle to be solved; judging future intentions requires more than just available information. This section offers some final thoughts meant to guide rather than resolve the complex policy questions facing Washington and Seoul’s decision-makers.

Diplomacy with North Korea will remain constrained by the need to preserve a stable balance of power while seeking to address the security concerns and mixed motives of both the US-ROK alliance and North Korea. Just as the United States and South Korea have to pursue overall stability for reasons transcending North Korea, the Kim regime has established an impressive track record of stability over 70 years. As one historian puts it, “for all its internal weaknesses, North Korea for most of its

Photo Caption: U.S. Vice President Joe Biden talks with Joint Security Area (JSA) soldiers during a visit to the border village of Panmunjom on December 7, 2013, South Korea. (Chung Sung-Jun/Getty Images)
history has managed rather effectively to deal with the outside world to its maximum advantage, whether playing off China and the USSR against one another in the Cold War, or China and the United States after the end of the Cold War.”

Kim's fears are offset by growing confidence; this mindset creates considerable barriers to using significant force but allows North Korea to resort to lower-level provocations. General Secretary Kim Jong-un has legitimate reasons to fear American military power, based on the history of US interventions globally and advanced US-ROK military capabilities. But the Kim family has also learned that the United States seldom goes beyond posturing with its shows of force. It has been decades since Operation Paul Bunyan demonstrated the resolve to fight, if necessary, to achieve a limited aim. Calls for removing US forces from the peninsula date to the founding of North Korea, but the presence of US forces as a hammer poised to strike should the Kim family launch an attack is less a threat and more of an obstacle to Pyongyang's designs. This means there is always an opportunity to scale back or refine US force presence and training on the peninsula, provided there remains some credible capability to deter by punishment.

Kim's threats and use of force are also mostly contained by Pyongyang's calculations about whether its actions are likely to trigger a massive response. North Korea's lethal use of force in 2010 awakened South Korea and the United States to adjust their localized and low-level force responses. The use of a landmine on the DMZ might have been a probe to determine whether the alliance remained ready to respond to every use of force. There remains a perennial threat that North Korea will launch local, small-scale attacks on its periphery, whether near the Northern Limit Line, the Demilitarized Zone, off its east coast, or in cyberspace. There also remains a human rights problem, as North Korea can execute or assassinate opponents of the regime in addition to unlawfully detaining foreigners. But given that Kim Jong-un wants to be a member of the nuclear club while shedding international sanctions, his provocations are likely to continue to be mostly modest uses of force, demonstrations of strategic weapons, cyber operations, human rights abuses, and bombast. More economic sanctions are not a deterrent, so long as China and Russia are determined to prevent North Korea's economic collapse, but sanctions—like the presence of credible US-ROK military capabilities—deny Pyongyang access to the resources and wealth it covets.

This study suggests that deterrence remains a sturdy but permeable barrier to war resumption on the peninsula. This is hardly a new insight. As Victor Cha and David Kang concluded in their thoughtful debate over how to handle nuclear North Korea: “As long as the United States and South Korea do not start a war, North Korea will not, either. North Korea has made it very clear it will fight back, but that is different from engaging in a preemptive or first strike.” However, developments could eventually alter that general conclusion, so there is an immediate need to find ways to avoid inadvertent escalation and manage potential crises. Meeting this need requires an alliance ready to defend itself at various levels of a notional escalation ladder without being either trigger-happy or over-reactive and assuming Pyongyang's relative acceptance of risk is open-ended.

Barring the withdrawal of all or nearly all US troops, or the dissolution of the alliance as a ready warfighting threat, deterrence is more likely to fail through accident, miscalcation, or inadvertence—missteps as part of a cascading crisis. New technologies, including those deemed a priority by Kim Jong-un at the Eighth Party Congress this year, could hamper decision-making and make miscalculation more likely. Similarly, the KPA may be revising its timelines to respond to the potential use of military innovations emanating from the US-ROK alliance. A miscalculation could arise from perceptions in Pyongyang that it could conduct with impunity a limited operation similar to those it has carried out or threatened to carry out in the past—including aggression over the five islands in the West Sea, shooting down a US or South Korean surveillance aircraft.
Fear and insecurity: addressing North Korean threat perceptions

or drone, or testing a long-range missile over Japan or near Guam. Nuclear expert Jeffrey Lewis has written a realistic fictional account in which an action-reaction cycle triggers a catastrophic nuclear war with North Korea. There remains a compelling case for discussions with North Korea and China about ways to reinforce deterrence and prevent the outbreak of conflict. Discussions should consider various potential crises and ways to de-escalate and talk back force posturing or the limited use of force before it unleashes a resumption of war.

The Biden administration is wise to strengthen alliances as a prerequisite for dealing with North Korea. By removing obstacles to an ironclad US-ROK alliance, the United States can find the maximum overlap of interests to redefine the political relationship with North Korea and reduce nuclear threats. Partly the task is attentive alliance management. For instance, if the alliance proceeds with a transition to South Korean wartime operational control (OPCON) by next year, the allies must have a shared concept for responding to any potential North Korean weapon use. On a range of matters—from a South Korean “kill chain” concept causing an escalatory spiral, to America’s extended nuclear umbrella’s credibility—the Biden and Moon administrations need to move forward with a firm agreement for alliance operational plans.

Ideally, even baby steps toward a rapprochement with Pyongyang should be done within an agreed framework of where we are heading—including the complete and verifiable denuclearization of the peninsula. But the journey in the direction of peace may be the best that can be hoped for anytime soon, which means most of the attention should be placed on the here and now. Victor Cha outlined a realistic framework for engaging North Korea. His formula includes “incremental steps each side would take to freeze nuclear operations at the main nuclear complex, Yongbyon, in return for some sanctions relief.” In his masterful review of North Korean threats and uses of force, David Shin concludes that some basic understanding with the North can be reached because “Kim is a rational actor that can be deterred to prevent an irrational act if Washington is ready to pursue diplomacy.” But diplomatic engagement with North Korea still needs to be embedded within a comprehensive alliance plan to include a confident and forward-looking vision for the future of the US-ROK alliance.

Because the United States’ interests and values support freedom and human rights, it is natural that internal oppression in a country known for its gulags will be watched, called out, and sanctioned as appropriate. Nonetheless, the United States and South Korea’s national security interests should, in general, subordinate human rights issues to the national goal of avoiding nuclear war and finding a durable peace. Addressing North Korea’s threat perceptions and views of force’s utility provides a good foundation for beginning all of those objectives.

Deep historical distrust and conflicting objectives make diplomatic progress with North Korea problematic but not impossible. A critical challenge for the Biden administration will be to forge alliance solidarity and then leverage the potential power that might flow from reducing the Kim regime’s fears and insecurities. This is a dynamic, not static, challenge. At the same time, Washington and Seoul should seek to preserve deterrence and advance diplomacy with North Korea. A new generation of Americans and South Koreans must deepen their shared understanding of the challenges they face and of ways to expand cooperation into new frontiers. The stakes are higher now than when North Korea invaded South Korea and ignited the Korean War. Order on the peninsula and in Northeast Asia hangs in the balance.
ENDNOTES


2 Ibid. Also referenced is “The President’s North Korea Strategy,” Cabinet Memo, March 28, 2017.


7 Consider one respected specialist on North Korea, Robert Carlin, faulting another respected specialist on North Korea, Jung Pak, for succumbing to confirmation bias in her well-researched book, Becoming Kim Jong Un. When researchers make the leap from strict facts and empirical data to the type of judgments required for making policy, confirmation bias can creep into any analysis. But accusing another analyst of confirmation bias can also reflect the confirmation bias of the accuser. See Jung H. Pak, Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer’s Insights into North Korea’s Enigmatic Young Dictator (New York: Ballantine Books, 2020); and Robert Carlin, “Book Review: Becoming Kim Jong Un: A Former CIA Officer’s Insights into North Korea’s Enigmatic Young Dictator,” 38 North, June 5, 2020, https://www.38north.org/2020/06/rcarlin060520/.


12 Ibid.


While the authors may not agree with my categorization, I am indebted to Shin, *Rationality in the North Korean Regime*, and Michishita, *North Korea’s Military-Diplomatic Campaigns*. For a view that sees the North Koreans as victims throughout all these campaigns, see A. B. Abrams, *Immovable Object: North Korea’s 70 Years at War with American Power* (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 2020).


Abrams, *Immovable Object*, 120.

Ibid., 129.

Ibid., 65.

The quotation is from Donald Gregg, who served both as CIA station chief in Seoul and US ambassador to South Korea, cited in Torrey Froscher, *“North Korea’s Nuclear Program: The Early Days, 1984–2002,”* *Studies in Intelligence* 63, no. 4 (December 2019), 17.


70 For instance, see William J. Perry, My Journey at the Nuclear Brink (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 106.


76 Jung H. Pak, Becoming Kim Jong Un, xli-xiii, 72-85.

77 Ellen Nakashima, “US Accuses Three North Koreans of Conspiring to Steal More than $1.3 Billion in Cash and Cryptocurrency,” Wash-
FEAR AND INSECURITY: ADDRESSING NORTH KOREAN THREAT PERCEPTIONS


93 The White House, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Jen Psaki and National Economic Director Brian Deese.”


100 Panda, Kim Jong Un and the Bomb, 92.


103 Jackson, On the Brink, 205.


105 Pak, Becoming Kim Jong Un, 226.


114 For a provocative study that introduces a younger generation of South Koreans and Americans to the diversity of relations between the two countries, see Theodore June Yoo, *The Koreas: The Birth of Two Nations Divided* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020).