Virtual Event | Kim Jong Un and the Northeast Asian Arms Race

TRANSCRIPT

Discussion

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Patrick Cronin:

Thank you for joining Hudson Institute's discussion today on Kim Jong-un and Arms Racing in Northeast Asia. I'm Patrick Cronin, Asia-Pacific Security Chair at Hudson, and I am delighted today to be joined by my distinguished colleague, Alex Wong, who among many other achievements recently served as the Deputy Special Representative for North Korea at the State Department. Jean Lee of the Wilson Center, a pioneer in the on-the-ground reporting inside North Korea, and Ankit Panda, the Stanton Senior Fellow in the Nuclear Policy Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and the author of the outstanding book, Kim Jong-un and the Bomb: Survival and Deterrence in North Korea. For Alex and me, you can find further details about our background, including links to my recent reports on Hudson's website as well as a more fulsome description of the impressive experience of Jean Lee and Ankit Panda on the Wilson Institute and Carnegie websites, respectively.

But let's turn straightaway to the recent events that have brought us together today. Until recently, North Korea had become a relatively quiet topic. Diplomacy had been largely stalled since 2019. It remains stalled really since, largely, 2019, with North Korea seemingly signaling scant interest in concessions or in talking with the United States or South Korea. Despite a contracting economy and the closing of the border with China and Kim's warning of another arduous march ending at the famine of the 1990s, North Korea seems to be making it through the global pandemic without visible signs of distress, although the most recent midnight parade featured paramilitary troops in hazmat suits flanked by fire trucks, horses and dogs rather than missiles.

Missile activity from North Korea has been limited this year with a cruise missile fired after the inauguration of President Biden, short-range missile tests in March, and so far as we know there've still been only six nuclear tests, with four happening during the reign of the third Kim in 2013, twice in 2016, and then in 2017, the last test accelerating both fears and then high-level diplomacy. Of course, Chairman Kim warned earlier this year that if he did not see concessions from the United States and, in fact, if the United States and South Korea continued with military exercises, he was preparing for "confrontation." And at North Korea's party congress in January, he telegraphed new strategic and theater weapons to include cruise missiles, tactical nuclear weapons and also hypersonic weapons.

So no one should've been taken off guard when on the evening of September 11th, of all nights, North Korea for the first time test launched two long-range land attack cruise missiles. That was followed within a couple of days with short-range missile launches and then another first, a new train-mounted ballistic missile test. In between, it was reported that South Korea had achieved its own breakthroughs, becoming the eighth country in the world and the only non-nuclear one to test a submarine-launched ballistic missile as it prepares to deploy a new class of submarines next year. It also reported a successful air-to-ground cruise missile test.

Presidents Moon and Biden agreed earlier this year to terminate the missile guidelines constraining South Korea's missile capabilities, and Seoul has put forward a military plan that, if passed, will mean the defense budget will have risen 6.5% every year of the last five years of this progressive Moon administration. All of these and other developments on the Korean Peninsula have been sandwiched between last month's withdrawal of US forces in Afghanistan and this month's more muscular diplomacy on the part of the United States in the form of the AUKUS, the Australia, UK, US cooperation that includes building a new nuclear submarine, nuclear power that is, and the Quad with a meeting of the leaders of Japan, Australia and India joining President Biden at the White House.

These developments are most certainly a response to growing challenges in the Indo-Pacific from North Korea but also from China, so we have a great deal to consider regarding North Korea and questions about arms competition in Northeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. I'm delighted first to turn to Ankit Panda
to provide some opening comments about North Korea’s weapons development and their implications for deterrence and regional security dynamics. Ankit.

Ankit Panda:
Right. Thank you, Patrick, for having me today and for that generous introduction. It’s been a busy week on the Korean Peninsula. Instead of talking about the specific missile capabilities that Kim Jong-un tested, the cruise missile and the ballistic missile mounted on a rail car, which I’ll talk about in a minute, I thought I would situate the developments that we’ve seen this week in terms of the two broader strategic trends that we've seen in North Korea as weapons development really since 2017 and a little bit earlier. The two themes, and I think both of these are at play with this week’s test, are on one hand a missile defense defeat. That's been big in North Korean missile defense in recent years, especially since 2019 onwards, and for survivability and responsiveness on the other hand, which I think has its origins going further back to 2016 and 2017 in North Korea as well.

Let’s begin by talking about the cruise missile test. As you said, North Korea tested multiple long-range cruise missiles, the first cruise missiles of this range class that it’s ever tested. Cruise missiles are not a new technology for North Korea, but the cruise missiles that they previously operated were short-range anti-ship missiles, Soviet origin, that they iterated on with some new seeker technology and guidance packages. But this new missile fundamentally is a longer range system. They allege that it flew to a range of 1,500 kilometers. I'll just highlight, you've mentioned a little bit about the inter-Korean dynamics here, 1,500 kilometers also just happens to be the stated public range of South Korea’s longest cruise missile, the Hyunmoo-3 sting, so it's interesting to see that parallel there.

But cruise missiles have a few advantages over ballistic missiles, one of those being that they fly low and slow in the earth’s atmosphere. So while they take much longer to get to their targets compared to ballistic missiles, which would cover 1,500 kilometers in a matter of minutes, cruise missiles present a considerably different sort of challenge to the defender. That means for the South Korea/US alliance, for Japan, which would also be in the range of these new cruise missiles, the challenge of orienting sensors, for instance, ground-based radars, to optimally detect and track these cruise missiles will now be something that has to receive additional planning.

This was not a threat that existed earlier, but North Korea has now clearly intended that they plan to continue developing this capability. Missile defense defeat I think is really what’s behind this cruise missile capability. I will also highlight that we should be concerned about the potential proliferation promise that these systems might hold, although that really seems to be more the MO that Kim Jong-un’s father had. Kim Jong-un himself hasn’t shown too much interest in exporting wholesale missile systems, so to speak. The potential still is there, especially as North Korea comes under additional economic strain in the coming years.

Now let me flip now to the other side of the ledger, which is for survivability and responsiveness. Ballistic missiles, of course, aren’t new to North Korea. I think we’re all quite familiar at this point, especially those of us who lived through 2016 and 2017 when it seemed like North Korea was testing a ballistic missile every two weeks or so. But this new missile test surprised me in some ways, the fact that it appeared on a rail car, but in some ways it didn't surprise me because I’d actually speculated before that, look, North Korea’s got all these railroads in the country. They have tunnel networks that exist. Rail ability is not a new idea for ballistic missile basing. The US considered it during the Cold War. The Soviet Union did it with ICBMs.

So on one hand, it makes sense that the North Koreans are going for this, but why are they doing it? I think there’s two reasons. A, putting these missiles on train cars creates a new sort of vector of attack that the US and South Korea have to think about now. In a way, it's a different sort of headache for
planners, particularly intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, which in a conflict would look to track North Korean transport erector launchers, command and control sites. Now also has to keep track of rail cars, so it just complicates and increases the complexity of the tracking challenge in an actual conflict, but also it makes these forces increasingly more survivable. In a crisis, North Korea could orient these rail cars in tunnel networks ready to deploy and disperse when necessary. Depending on how they put together their operational procedures, these systems might even be more responsive than some of their ground-launch missile systems.

I'll stop there, but I'm looking forward to the rest of the discussion today.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Well, Ankit, thank you. That's a very clear initial description of some of the tests and systems we're seeing out of North Korea. I'll be very interested to come back to you a bit later in the program to talk about this question of survivability both from a nuclear strategic second strike capability if that's in play at all here in Northeast Asia and Indo-Pacific, but also maybe it's this conventional second strike capability that we're starting to see with South Korea going more towards submarines, Japan as well. Perhaps, they're focused more on the conventional side of this, but if you just come back to this question of if you don't know whether you're launching a conventional weapon or a nuclear weapon, the crisis instability implications of this going forward, what does this mean for Northeast Asia and Indo-Pacific?

But let's go now to Jean Lee to try to understand, reassess really, what is Kim up to? Where is he going, Jean? And what is your sense of the stability of North Korean society right now? This 20 months into the pandemic they seem to be doing relatively well and yet that recent parade suggested that they were on high alert ready for potentially a much darker period that could come if this pandemic finally does reach North Korea. What's your sense of Kim's thinking on these tests? Put this into political and social context for us.

**Jean Lee:**

Sure. I would argue that we need to go back farther than 20 months to assess what Kim Jong-un is dealing with. I'd go back to 2019, to be honest, and the fallout from the breakdown of those US-DPRK talks in Hanoi. Alex certainly knows that very intimately. Kim Jong-un wasn't expecting to go home empty handed after all the buildup and the promise of this landmark deal with the United States, so I saw North Korea going into a kind of inwardly focused period of isolation well before the COVID-19 pandemic. I've often felt that the pandemic just provided a convenient opportunity for North Korea, for Kim Jong-un to seal the borders and to buy him some time to work out how to pivot from that failure and to work out a strategy going forward.

This is not to say that North Korea doesn't have a real reason for fearing the pandemic. I've spent many, many days and hours inside North Korean hospitals from their most sterling, topflight hospitals to rural clinics, and I can tell you that their medical system simply is not prepared to cope with the pandemic. These are facilities that are spotless. The North Koreans, everything is absolutely spotless in Pyongyang, but in most cases it is like stepping back 100 years in terms of their infrastructure. And so their strategy is to focus on preventative efforts, and that includes sealing the borders to keep the virus out. Of course, that does help the regime control the narrative, control the messaging.

When you seal the borders, it means you don't have as many prying foreign eyes coming into the country and you don't have North Koreans bringing gossip or the latest news from the outside world across the border. But it also means that the North Koreans don't have all the goods and medicine, the aid, the supplies that they need to get by, and so I think it's safe to assume that there's suffering and
hardship in most parts of North Korea. Honestly, in this day and age I can't think of any country that can really thrive in self-isolation, and especially not North Korea, which just never has been blessed with the resources to take care of itself.

So one major concern I have is what is North Korea doing to make itself more self-reliant so that it doesn't have to open its borders. As some of you may know, I am looking at this issue now with my podcast, The Lazarus Heist, which is about North Korean cyber, because I'm very curious to know, is cyber helping to keep the economy, the elites, the military and the nuclear program afloat. And how does that diminish diplomatic efforts to draw North Korea out of isolation?

The other thing I want to mention is that those border closures mean that we don't have a clear view into what's happening inside North Korea. We rely on their state media as well as satellite imagery, and frankly, they're using those platforms in order to send very specific signals and messages to the outside world. Unfortunately, because North Korea has been so quiet, I would say "quiet," the world is lapping up those messages right now and I think there's a risk to overreacting to them just as Pyongyang wants, to be honest. I'm not saying that we shouldn't take note. We absolutely should, but there's a stronger risk more than ever for a kind of disinformation that policymakers and the media may be prey to. I've certainly seen this happen.

In terms of how to read the recent spate of events, I, frankly, see Kim Jong-un setting the stage for a reemergence, but he wants to reemerge in a stronger position. That means building more nuclear weapons. And even though it may seem to the outside world that North Korea's been quiet, I've been saying since 2019, "Don't be fooled. They are continuing to build their nuclear program so that they have more if and when it comes to the time when they sit down for those negotiations." I do believe he wants to get back to negotiations. I think Kim Jong-un was waiting to see if Donald Trump would be reelected. When he wasn't, he was waiting to see what the Biden administration's North Korea policy might be, but he's clearly losing patience and that's, I think, not a surprise.

These aren't impulsive moves. Everything North Korea does is so carefully calculated and I think it's important to see these moves in that vein if we want to understand the motivation and the strategy behind the missile tests. North Korea's often called unpredictable, but if you've been watching North Korea consistently over the years, I think it's safe to say that there's some pattern to their behavior. Ankit is my go-to expert when it comes to understanding what each of these technological developments mean and we'll get back to that, but for me, I do try to look at the messaging and the strategy that might be behind each of these tests.

I'm just going to say that this return to missile testing is so carefully timed. It's not a coincidence that they were conducted just as we have this flurry of diplomacy in Northeast Asia. We had nuclear envoys in Tokyo as well as in Seoul. We had China's foreign minister in Seoul. All of this was happening at a time when all these discussions were going on behind closed doors. And really, they were designed to create this sense of urgency, to build the tension around their program and to make sure that while the world and world leaders are perhaps distracted by the pandemic, by Afghanistan, by the domestic fallout in each of their countries from the pandemic, that they are reminded that North Korea's continuing to expand its program.

Just on the train-launch ballistic missiles I just want to mention one more thing. I found those absolutely fascinating. If you saw the footage, I mean it's just astounding, but I kept thinking about the message it would convey to the North Korean people. I know we're always looking at what message are they trying to send to us, but I'm also looking at it, because I spent so much time in Pyongyang when these provocations were taking place, I can just tell you that there would be such a sense of pride with every one of these developments among the North Korean people that they had accomplished this. The train is a particularly interesting symbolic direction that they're taking because the train is so closely
associated with Kim Jong-il. Of course, Kim Jong-un took a train to Vietnam, so there's a lot of symbolism that goes into calculating these tests as well for not only the external world, for us, but also for the domestic audience to instill a sense of pride in the North Korean people, for Kim Jong-un to show them he's defending them.

I think I'll leave it at that, Patrick. I'm really looking forward to what you and Alex have to say.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Well, thank you, Jean. We're going to go to Alex in just one second. I do want to say that I hope we'll come back to you for a second round of questions and talk about your interest in cyber in North Korea but also the sanctions circumvention that North Korea seems to be so adept at, according to a UN experts report that's been leaked. And it will be coming out presumably after the General Assembly passes it this next month. It suggests that really North Korea's done very well at circumventing a lot of the harsher sanctions that have been put in place since 2017, since indeed the significant missile testing and advances in North Korea's program.

Also, another aspect that I hope we come back to on Jean is Kim's loss of weight. Not related to the sanctions, perhaps, but perhaps related to the fact that the economy is seen as contracting and that they are worried about the famine still possibly reaching and just where does this potential for instability in spotless Pyongyang, is it a fear that the spotlessness will suddenly be stained? What exactly is, you think, on his mind on this? But let's turn to Alex. Alex, your deep policy experience on the Hill, at the Pentagon, at the State Department. You were going to the United Nations, all of these things while being on the point of dealing with North Korea policy.

Jean already telegraphed that 2019 was back in that period when we were still expecting potentially follow on to the Singapore Summit to succeed in Hanoi. That, as we know, is history. Where have we gone? Where has the Biden administration gone in your perspective and what are the US policy options and opportunities here?

**Alex Wong:**

Right. Right. Thanks, Patrick. When looking at options, you have to look at the intentions and the current situation, but in 2019 at the end of the Hanoi Summit to now, I think you see a couple of things. I think you see an agnostic or a negative attitude toward engagement and even humanitarian assistance. You see a consistent testing and investment in short-range and even medium-range missiles. You see a rebuilding of missile test sites as well as the restart of the Yongbyon reactor, at least a five-megawatt plutonium reactor. You've seen consistent warming of ties between the DPRK and China and a correlating relaxation on the part of China in sanctions enforcement.

Taking all of that into account since the beginning of 2019, I think this is a return to what you could deem a politically safe default position for the Kim regime. In other words, testing the US and the ROK periodically, keeping on the lookout for any opportunities to reap rewards from those provocations, from that probing. And third, continually building leverage in terms of weapons capability as well as deterrent capability. Now, this is the kind of policy, I say it's politically safe because it's something that all the rivalrous parts of the DPRK regime can sign on to. It's also the type of policy that should you recommend it within the DPRK regime, it doesn't get you sent to the labor camps.

But the US also has to make sure it's not the type of policy or the policy that gets the DPRK what it ultimately seeks, and what Chairman Kim is seeking here is legitimacy on the international scene. He's seeking economic development and he's seeking regime security. He'd like to get all of those without giving up his nuclear weapons capability. In response, I think the US and I think the Biden team is
thinking strongly about maintaining a strong stance that pushes the DPRK, channels them into talks and out of this cyclical posture, this default posture of provocation and steady improvement in its weaponry.

Now, that’s easy to say. That’s hard to do. One way that the Trump administration, as you mentioned, pushed the DPRK out of this cyclical posturing into talks, or at least to change their thinking and disturb their thinking about this, was to boldly go for a leader-level summit. Now, I’m not recommending a summit here for Biden. First of all, I think you can really only use that once or at least once every few years, but second, there are other factors that are mitigating against that and making it unfeasible.

Number one is simply COVID-19. The leaderships can’t get together and likely Kim Jong-un is not leaving the country if he’s going to do that summit. Number two, we’re looking at the broader regional strategic landscape. US-China relations are at a low point and the incentive for the DPRK here is not to engage with us. And the incentive for China is not to push the DPRK to do it, but it’s for the DPRK to step back and see if it can reap rewards while the two superpowers are battling it out.

Third, I think the DPRK is waiting and looking at upcoming leadership changes in Japan and the ROK before they make any type of bold move, including a summit. But putting aside a summit, putting aside forthright, bold attempts at diplomacy, there are other methods to disturb the DPRK’s thinking here.

Number one I want to point out to you is exercises, and this is something I think the Biden team and the Moon government have talked deeply about. When President Trump paused exercises during the Singapore Summit, the assumption was or the broad thinking is that it’s a freeze for freeze, a freeze on our exercises or at least a downgrading and spreading out of our exercises in return for a freeze on long-range missile tests. That was never the case.

The freeze or the pause in major joint military exercises was due or always contingent on the DPRK participating in good faith in a diplomatic process, and I think at this point you can say that they’re not doing that. So rethinking exercises, upgrading them, not just doing them but doing them in a loud fashion that really displays our deterrent capability together with the ROK is something we should think about. Number two, we should talk about investments or more investments in ballistic missile defense and the missile capability of not just the United States but of our allies. I think we’re seeing that in the scrapping of the RMG guidelines as you mentioned, Patrick, and some other activities. This has the effect of telling the DPRK that their improvement in missile capability is not without cost, but it also has the indirect effect of worrying China here. If China sees the DPRK as a main reason why we are pursuing those new capabilities, that is an incentive for China to use its leverage with Pyongyang.

Third, I’ll just briefly mention a renewed effort to get third countries to up their enforcement of sanctions can have a real effect on the DPRK. This is something we did at the tail end of the... really, over the last few years of the Trump administration and it really had an effect. I know that because the DPRK would tell us it had an effect on their thinking and they weren’t too happy about it. But while we do all these things, I think it’s important to say that we have to keep the diplomatic offer open. That keeps the political onus on the DPRK and their intransigence and not engaging in talks, but it also preserves the pressure campaign for all the third countries that we need to participate in that. What I mean by that is a lot of countries are not interested in the long term of prosecuting a pressure campaign if they don’t see an end to it, or at least a peaceful option for ending that pressure campaign.

Something I always said to partners and what I’ll say now is diplomacy without pressure is, of course, futile. But pressure without at least the openness to diplomacy is not sustainable. Those are the kinds of thoughts I would grant to the Biden team and I know they’re thinking about it. But I'll end my remarks there and we'll go into the discussion.
Patrick Cronin:

Alex, great opening remarks. I do want to come back in a few minutes to talk more about maybe tactical openings. When would be the right time for the Biden administration to actually do something, show some initiative, and sanctions reduction seems to be one of the questions that North Korea's looking for. It's also obviously looking for something the Biden administration's not going to give Kim Jong-un, and that's recognition as a nuclear weapons state. That's in the big picture of negotiations. You've talked about restraint on exercises being contingent and that they've lost that essentially and that moment, and yet it was very interesting to see how both Kim and his sister signaled pretty clearly in the summer that there was going to be more confrontation coming if they didn’t get their way. So they told us what was going to happen, in effect, not the details, but they did hint at it.

The question is when is there an opening in this sort of scenario, these trendlines, in your view for the Biden administration to think about? But first, let me go back to Ankit. I want to come back on this question of crisis stability, but maybe you've got some other thoughts as well. Ankit, I'm sure you do, about is indeed Kim's nuclear goal here to be both recognized as a nuclear power and to have that survivable force that makes sure that there can be no attack launched against him, or is he looking for many other goals? You write about this at length in your book, so I know this is a big subject. But right now as you think about Kim's goals on his nuclear weapons and on his missiles that could house nuclear weapons, what do you think he's trying to achieve with those weapons?

Ankit Panda:

Sure. I mean, my interpretation is that legitimacy is important to Kim Jong-un, but it's absolutely secondary to practical nuclear deterrence. I think one of the nice pieces of evidence I like to go back to is September 2017. Not long after fire and fury and the height of the US-North Korea crisis in 2017, former North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho comes to New York City, speaks to the General Assembly shortly after North Korea had just demonstrated a thermonuclear weapons. He speaks to this notion of legitimacy and recognition as a nuclear weapons state. He tells world leaders gathered there that North Korea doesn't need that kind of recognition, and it's an interesting speech. It's something that I recommend that folks go back and read because it really does demonstrate the ways in which North Korea thinks about their own legitimacy.

The way they see nuclear legitimacy manifesting is through effective nuclear deterrence. In a way, I think they had that theory vindicated by what happened in 2018 and 2019. Right? Kim Jong-un declares his nuclear deterrent complete in November 2017 after the first and only test of the Hwasong-15 ICBM. And lo and behold, months later he’s meeting the president of the United States in Singapore. That theory I think for the North Koreans did play out.

In just reflecting on the notion of legitimacy as a nuclear power, I know this comes up a lot in discussions in DC that we cannot recognize North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, I mean, to which I'll only point out that I just don't see any kind of fundamental legal recognition du jour in the international system for nuclear weapons possessors outside of the Non-Proliferation Treaty. North Korea left the Non-Proliferation Treaty and developed a nuclear deterrent, to which I'll also point out there's a press conference with the Chinese Foreign Ministry in 2017 where a reporter asks China, for instance, about whether they recognize India or Pakistan as nuclear weapon states. And the Chinese say, "No, we haven't. We don't fundamentally recognize these countries as nuclear weapons possessors."

So this notion of what it means to be a recognized nuclear weapons possessor in the international system is an interesting question. I'll just also say that in the last few years we've had multiple senior US military officials testify before Congress indicating very clearly and openly that the US military is absolutely planning as if North Korea has the capability to deliver nuclear weapons to targets on the
Korean Peninsula, in Japan, Guam, and the US homeland. If I’m North Korea and I’m listening to that and I’m reading those transcripts, I think that’s good enough for me.

Zooming out a little bit, Patrick, you asked a question about crisis instability, which I think is absolutely critical. I mean, my interpretation of North Korea's nuclear strategy is that they are offensively oriented. They are trying to deter an asymmetric, conventionally superior alliance to the south, South Korea and the United States. The way they chose to practice deterrence is by threatening the early use of nuclear weapons, implying in the classic shelling parlance and brinksmanship that they are hoping to manifest a threat that leaves something to chance. Effectively, in a crisis the North Koreans want the Americans and the South Koreans to think that any military action that we take to protect our interests might result in nuclear escalation and that the North Koreans are willing to go first.

Then these kinds of systems like dual-capable cruise missiles, dual-capable ballistic missiles, tactical nuclear weapons that Kim Jong-un has been talking about as of the Eighth Party Congress, all I think fit very well into that strategy and are fundamentally unsurprising, but they are absolutely not developments that we should be inviting or wishing to see on the Korean Peninsula, which is why folks like me have been talking about doing some kind of process of, if not arms control, but risk reduction with North Korea. I mean there's been evidence that this has all been coming back to 2015 and 2016 even, so the capabilities that we're seeing today are really part of that broader story.

My hope is that the Biden administration, of course, has I think recognized this. We've heard quite explicitly from certain officials in the Biden administration that they are now thinking of denuclearization as a long-term objective. I think that's a subtle but important change in the way in which the US publicly talks about its aspirations for denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, which is still our desired end state. But in the short term we are seeking to practically reduce the threat and the administration has used that language. I think that's absolutely the right approach here, but I agree with what Jean and Alex have said about the inhibitors right now to practical diplomacy with North Korea. It's not just the COVID-19 pandemic.

I do think, and I would just echo what Jean said, that really in the aftermath of Hanoi going back to the 14th Supreme People's Assembly in April 2019, you really see evidence of Kim Jong-un flipping a switch again, reverting back to internal isolation mode, focusing on the nuclear deterrent, focusing on self-reliant development of national defense capabilities, and basically biding his time. Perhaps, one of the takeaways that Kim left Hanoi with was that, well, he might've completed his deterrence in qualitative terms as of November 2017 by demonstrating an ICBM capability, but in quantitative terms he might not have gone far enough.

So we might just have to bide our time, wait and see what happens in North Korea. Unfortunately, centrifuges will continue to spin. Yongbyon will continue to operate. Plutonium will be reprocessed. More warheads will be manufactured and we will probably be back at the negotiating table with a slimmer, healthier Kim Jong-un at the end of this pandemic with a lot more nuclear weapons and with less to show for it, unfortunately.

**Patrick Cronin:**

Ankit, just very briefly a follow-up on developments in hypersonics. The solid fuel, the mobility, put all of these things together and the fact that Japan and South Korea in particular are also focused more on China in the long term than they are on North Korea. They're developing their own programs in these high-tech areas just as North Korea's talked about. All of those are putting pressure up against the negotiations that you talk about being sensible and that the Biden administration seems to embrace, but North Korea's not picking up on yet.
I mean, these are two different races, right? I mean the arms control race is really slow. The arms modernization is faster. Are you worried about in that intersection the fact that they've only recently just had discussions to reintroduce the hotline between North and South Korea, the DMZ, and it's not clear that that's going to work very well in a real crisis. So just a sense of how much concern should there be about that potential crisis occurring?

Ankit Panda:
Yeah, absolutely. I mean look, I think one of the most positive developments that came out of the 2018-2019 period of the diplomacy was the Pyongyang summit Comprehensive Military Agreement between the two Koreas. It was a pathbreaking attempt at deconfliction, at stabilizing the areas around the DMZ. It didn't, of course, address all of the core causes of conflict on the Korean Peninsula, but it was certainly a very promising start. It was successfully implemented for a little bit over a year and then after the Hanoi summit we, of course, saw a decline in inter-Korean relations and North Korea's willingness to then comply with that agreement.

Then, Patrick, to your broader points about arms racing dynamics on the Korean Peninsula and broader dynamics in Northeast Asia where, of course, as you pointed out, we have a very messy multipolar competition. It's not just North Korea. It's China, the United States' posturing in the Indo-Pacific to deter a nuclear-armed North Korea, to deter China. And the capabilities that we deploy to deter China can then strike North Korea, causing feedback loops. We're about to see the US increasingly deploy new missile capabilities in the region after the end of the INF Treaty, for instance. So there's a lot to talk about here.

I'll just zoom in on the inter-Korean piece of this because I do think that's interesting and worth discussing in this context. There's a version of President Moon that you'll often come across in certain discussions on Korea in DC, which is that he's a total peacenik dove, a human rights lawyer, very interested in peace at all costs with North Korea. But then you look at trends in South Korean defense spending, defense R&D since mid-2017 when President Moon came into office, and the story that you see there is very different. You see a South Korea that's continuing to invest in all range of advanced capabilities, many of which were, of course, just tested and validated this year.

North Korea's Eighth Party Congress speech I think has a very good counterpart in South Korea's own intermediate-term national defense plan, which was approved by the National Assembly last year. You look at that, you see over $250 billion of defense spending planned over five years for everything, including cruise missiles, new ballistic missiles with heavy payloads, military satellites, submarine-launch ballistic missiles, aircraft carriers, nuclear propulsion submarines potentially down the line. When you put two and two together there, you really do see that tit for tat. And the North Koreans absolutely, I think, are perceiving this sort of dynamic.

Kim Yo-jong, who has de facto become the voice of the North Korean regime on inter-Korean affairs in recent years, has consistently pointed to these kinds of developments. When the South Koreans tested the two-ton payload Hyunmoo-4 ballistic missiles, the North Koreans followed that up with a two-and-a-half ton new short-range ballistic missile earlier this March, so you really do see this very petty kind of tit for tat. I, of course, pointed out that the claimed range on their new cruise missile matches the range of South Korea's longest range cruise missile. We do maybe see that on the South Korean side of the ledger too with the turn to a submarine-launch ballistic missile program a few years after North Korea introduced that capability as well.

These dynamics I think do need to be addressed through a process of mutual risk reduction or arms control. And if we don't get there, and I fundamentally do recognize that there are obstacles to getting there, especially with North Korea, which has historically had all kinds of hangups talking in any
specificity about things on verification and monitoring, the next best thing that we can hope for then is to actually manage communications in a crisis, which is why the value of hotlines can be there even though the Korean People's Army, of course, can be very inconsistent in the application of those hotlines on a day-to-day basis. So, lots to talk about here. We could go on for hours.

Patrick Cronin:
Yes. It’s an endless conversation, North Korea, and it happens in a very interesting and dynamic context. Jean, I wanted to come back both on the economy and the cyber dimensions of North Korea's policies but also maybe the North-South dynamic here. Looking ahead to the South Korean election, it is interesting, as Ankit was just suggesting, that you have this progressive Moon administration that's been extremely hawkish, very nationalistic in terms of continuing the kill chain of preemptive strike capability, missile defense capability, massive retaliation capability. Those three strands of hard-line defense are part of the Moon administration's midterm defense plan and we may have a more conservative South Korean government coming in next year.

When you're in Pyongyang and you're thinking about the dynamics of what South Korea's up to, how are you reacting to that, especially, again, going back to the earlier question about how is this economy surviving in North Korea? How is this spotlessness staying in place when, in fact, the economy was seen as contracting to historic low numbers this past year according to the Bank of Korea? There's no bright spot really for the economy of North Korea at the moment as far as I can see.

Jean Lee:
On the South Korean build up, I think there's another way to look at this, and it might be seen differently from Pyongyang, to be absolutely honest, regardless of what words were put into Kim Yo-jong's statements. Because there's another way to look at this build up, which is South Korea's assertion of its sovereignty, its desire to defend itself. So regardless of what we've seen in a statement attributed to Kim Yo-jong, I think that Pyongyang could be looking at it in a different way as well. I think we need to be a bit cautious, or I don't know if cautious is the right word, but I'm waiting to see how all this plays out. I see it a little bit differently and that might be from my perspective as somebody who spent so much time in South Korea and in North Korea, that there's another message that could be conveyed with this build up, which is that South Korea feels that it wants to be able to defend itself rather than rely on the United States. Perhaps, a little bit of a controversial point of view, but I couldn't help but think that having spent so much time in Seoul and Pyongyang.

Now, as to the economy, I just wanted to... Ankit painted such a great picture of where we may be headed in North Korea's build up, but it did remind me that when you're there in North Korea, you see how much that military industry provides for the people, how many jobs it provides, how much productivity it generates for the North Korean economy. So it's hard for me to see the North Koreans pulling away from that because it is such a huge part of their identity and their economy. But I just want to remind you that it comes at great expense for the ordinary North Korean. I mean, this is one of the world's poorest countries devoting a huge amount of its meager budget to weapons at the expense of basic infrastructure.

You mentioned the lack of visible signs of hardship. Well, that's because we're not there and you don't see what I see on the ground when I leave Pyongyang, which is that there are very few roads. I mean, there are very few paved roads. Just when you leave the capital, it's just complete underdevelopment, as it was in Korea in 1953. Homes without windows, cracked windowpanes in a country where it is freezing in the wintertime. There is a price that the North Koreans are paying for this emphasis on allocating resource to the nuclear weapons.
Now, in terms of sanctions, again, North Koreans are incredibly resourceful. I am just amazed at how resourceful the North Koreans I encountered were in dealing with what little they had, but they've been coping with sanctions for many, many years. It's unfortunate, of course, that they are the ones who are suffering the greatest harm from the decisions that their leadership has made in order to prioritize nuclear weapons over the people. But sanctions, if you look at them as a diplomatic tool, there is potential. It is one way to get the North Koreans to the table, but they're only effective if enforced, as Alex mentioned. We're starting to see that some countries are not only becoming lax in that enforcement, there's certainly been a drop off in enforcing them, but that there are some countries that may be surreptitiously getting around them and helping North Korea because they don't want to see North Korea collapse.

Certainly, when I mentioned cyber, I think it's been very hard for sanctions to really get at cyber, so it's a great investment for the North Koreans because it's low cost, has so much potential for asymmetric warfare and so much potential for cyber theft without having to worry about the sanctions. In terms of lifting of sanctions, I do think that there's potential for that as a diplomatic exchange or concession, but it has to happen, I think, in the context of diplomacy. But there is another first step that might be possible, and that's humanitarian aid. Can we find a way to engage the North Koreans on humanitarian aid. As Alex mentioned, I think they've been saying no, but I do see signs that North Korea or Kim Jong-un may be setting the stage to perhaps allow in some humanitarian aid, so that might be a good first step.

Did you want to talk about the weight loss, which I think has been captivating-

**Patrick Cronin:**
Say something about that, yes.

**Jean Lee:**
... for many people. I mean, I think that somebody clearly told him that he needed to go on a diet. Maybe it was Kim Yo-jong. Maybe it was his wife, or maybe it was a doctor. Because the fact is he comes from a family where his father and his grandfather had some serious illnesses, heart disease, diabetes, and I have seen him from the time he was just this chubby cheeked young man who had a little bit of baby fat to the weight really creeping up over the past 10 years to the point where you couldn't help but wonder, was his weight, was his health the biggest risk to his leadership?

It's been interesting to see how the North Korean propaganda has portrayed it. It's been portrayed as, oh my gosh, look at the sacrifices our leader has made. It's not just us who's suffering. He's suffering as well. Because of course, in North Korea a little bit of weight is seen as a good thing, so it's been interesting to see how that has been portrayed. But I think that certainly the young, what did you call it, Ankit, the slimmer, healthier Kim Jong-un, is also designed to show a kind of stability and strength and vitality that Kim Jong-un often represents to the North Korean people.

But again, you also asked about the potential for instability. These are the things that are so hard for us to gage when we're not on the ground. We have fewer people, reliable sources on the ground today than we have in I can't remember how long, and that means it's hard for us to gage what the mood is. That for me is the hardest thing not being there is getting the feel, the pulse for what people are gossiping about, what the mood is like, what actually is happening with the economy. That's really hard, so I can't answer that question.
Patrick Cronin:
COVID has really shut down so many channels of communication from on the ground in particular, but those are great points, Jean. I do wonder about the humanitarian assistance. It has been offered repeatedly by both the Trump administration, by the Biden administration, including for COVID relief, but it's been largely rebuffed. I know the Biden administration officials both at the United Nations and at the White House and State Department have all been careful to say, "This is a result of North Korean policies, first and foremost, but we are very attuned to the humanitarian crisis and we are watching it." It does seem to be an obvious opener, potentially, and this goes maybe now to Alex in terms of diplomatic openers.

How do you get a discussion going again at this point with all that's happened and the fact that the US-China relationship is in a much darker place perhaps than it was a couple years ago when we were pursuing the summits directly between President Trump and Kim? Relations are tougher and things are getting more conservative with South Korea potentially next year. I think Prime Minister Suga's successor, probably Taro Kono next month, is going to be pretty much a steady hand on these issues but is still going to continue to be wanting a tough line on North Korea potential proliferation. Especially given the fact that things like long-range cruise missiles can reach throughout Japan, Japan has to be worried about missiles landing in their EEZ and they're not able to respond to these.

Alex, how does this policy landscape, again, look to you and starting from the humanitarian assistance as potentially being an opener to how do we corral allies and how do we deal with other major powers like China in the months ahead?

Alex Wong:
Right. Well, I think, first of all, the Biden administration should be, and I think is, and our allies should be prepared that there may not be an opening for diplomacy in the near term. We could be here in this period of a default policy position of the DPRK of doing nothing for months or years. That doesn't mean we shouldn't probe ourselves where diplomacy may be possible. I'm always careful to say we shouldn't be too eager or more eager for talks. That in itself can disincent the DPRK from engaging in a goodwill manner, but being open to diplomacy, as I said before in my opening remarks, puts the political onus on the DPRK and also gives us the political lift under the pressure campaign that is a way that perhaps we can change the strategic outlook of the DPRK to make a different choice on engagement.

Now, as far as humanitarian assistance, the right position and the longstanding position of the United States is that those decisions are made in conjunction with our allies and the UN and NGOs based upon the humanitarian need of the North Korea people, and we push for verification and non-diversion measures for that, which is a large reason why the DPRK doesn't like to accept it. But I'm not naïve enough to say that humanitarian assistance, if given under that rubric, does open up chances for engagement with the DPRK, opens up opportunities for building goodwill, opens up opportunities for getting messages over the heads of various ministries and straight into the inner circle of Kim Jong-un, if not Kim Jong-un himself about the intentions and the possibilities of diplomatic engagement either with the United States, with the ROK, or perhaps through third parties who are mutual friends, the Swedes or others or the Swiss, who have had success in the past, at least beginning the seeds of discussion about further engagement.

Now, these are all general strategies and a lot of it is implemented in the day-to-day tactical work implemented by the State Department and others, but these are all the opportunities we have to continue to grow in the event the DPRK makes a different decision amidst a strategic landscape that they see.
Patrick Cronin:
Alex, when you think about some of the policy constraints on the Biden administration dealing with North Korea, I mean I'm thinking of Congress right now, very difficult to get any kind of a quorum on any issue across both sides of the aisle. But if you're talking about sanctions relief, probably a nonstarter. Humanitarian assistance can be done, as you say, more in concert with allies and partners and NGOs. But on the other side, military exercises that you talked about and hinted at, and we may get a more conservative government next year in South Korea. They may have a bigger appetite for resuming large-scale military exercises, but we also saw North Korea's reaction to even these minimalista exercises that just occurred because they weren't happy with the hostile policy represented in terms of these biannual exercises that the US-ROK alliance conducts every year. They've been downsized. They've been scaled way back, and yet North Korea's still not happy. They won't be happy if there's any exercise.

But there are the constraints for the Biden administration. If it goes soft with the humanitarian assistance or sanctions relief without getting much in return, then it'll be assailed by the Republicans and we won't have a majority in the United States supporting the policy. That'll undermine them. On the other hand, if he waits too long to see some opportunity, we've got these other trendlines going that suggest potential crisis instability, insecurity, mounting the strategic patience that was assailed as purportedly an Obama administration policy earlier. There was too much patience waiting. So you can't get it. Either way here, you get attacked on these issues.

From the partisan debate on this issue, I'm just trying to get a sense of, because you know these issues so well. You know how difficult it is to put together a majority view behind Biden administration to try to deal with North Korea's successfully. I hear what you're saying in terms of it may be important just to wait. There's maybe no strategic opening in the near term, and that's probably actually correct. But at some point United States is going to have to do something here to at least tamp down presumably the proliferation potential and the potential for crisis and deal with a new South Korean government and a new Japanese government that'll be here next month.

How do you see the politics of this playing out for Biden's maneuverability? How much latitude does he have here?

Alex Wong:
Right. My feeling on that is actually I don't think the domestic politics of the United States plays that much into the decision making of the administration or shouldn't play too much in the decision making of the administration in terms of starting diplomacy or new initiatives to shake up the status quo where we're seeing the DPRK develop more missiles and stay in its default position. Where it does become an issue is if there's actually an agreement, that is when the debate and the discussion and the question of what role Congress is playing in that, that's when that comes into play. But I'll tell you, I think the DPRK policy sphere actually sits in a kind of comfortable political pocket as between Republicans and Democrats in DC.

The Trump administration, we certainly enjoyed that pocket a little bit because historically it's been the Democrats who have been more supportive of engagement and forthright engagement, whereas President Trump was a Republican. So we neutralized the politics that might affect decision making, at least tactically, at the outset of diplomacy in the Trump administration. I think that survives into the Biden administration, given that we're just a few months off from a Republican president shaking hands with Kim Jong-un three times. It's more of an issue on the back end if there is an agreement, which that's a good problem to have if you actually get an agreement and it's a good one, to have that political fight. But at the outset I'm not too worried, or at least the Biden administration should not be too worried, about the political implications.
Patrick Cronin:

Great. In our just remaining couple of minutes here, I want to go back to each one of you just for a final recap of where do we stand after this week of military demonstrations and the fact that we still have a standoff diplomatically and the United States has bigger policy challenges beyond North Korea. North Korea was quickly overshadowed by the concerns about China. It's been overshadowed by obviously the pullout of Afghanistan, and that's raised questions, frankly, in the region of the Indo-Pacific about whether you need to be more self-reliant if you're an Indo-Pacific country because you're not sure... You're even less sure today than you were maybe yesterday about United States reliability. That could be driving weapons programs. It could be driving policy choices in capitals in the Indo-Pacific.

Where do you think we are right now in the midst of this sort of very dramatic flurry of missile tests in North Korea, the slimmer, svelte Kim Jong-un reappearing on the scene but not quite ready for diplomacy yet, but perhaps he will be? Let's just take it back in the order we started in, Ankit, Jean, and then Alex, you've got the last word.

Ankit Panda:

Well, thanks, Patrick. I mean, the North Koreans are certainly all in on self-reliance, I'll say. No, but I mean taking a look at the bigger picture right now, I mean, I see a handful of indicators that we might be looking at the start of a new, I don't want to say missile testing campaign, but military modernization campaign in North Korea. One of these campaigns, which I talk about in my book, is the Pyongyang campaign that took place between March 2018 and November 2017 culminating in the test of the Hwasong-15, after which North Korea pivoted to diplomacy.

Now they've been recalibrating, producing fissile material for two years through the diplomacy of 2018 and 2019. 2020 was a little bit of an odd year with the COVID-19 pandemic putting a damper on a lot of the KPA's normal military tempo, but that didn't stop weapons R&D, as we're now seeing. Now Yongbyon is back up and running. Kim Jong-un at the Eighth Party Congress outlined a wide ranging agenda for the coming years. We've started to see new weapons tests. We've seen internal promotion, which is something we've not talked about today yet. Pak Jong-chon, for instance, the former head of the KPA, promoted to marshal and then demoted to vice marshal, then promoted again. He's now back on the presidium of the Workers' Party of Korea.

He's been the guy overseeing these new weapons tests too, which suggests that part of the reason we're seeing this new campaign of testing is also due to what's happening at the highest levels of the leadership. Ri Pyong-chol, for instance, who was overseeing these tests in 2019 and 2020, I don't want to say he's on the out, but he's been demoted and certainly seems less prominent now. Given everything that Kim Jong-un has laid out, I think we'll see the North Koreans continue to keep a low profile, express very little interest in diplomacy or engagement with the outside world. I think that also goes for the nature of their relationship with China and Russia. They will not seek to alienate China and Russia, but they will not also seek to further strategically ingrain themselves with what Beijing is seeking at this point.

Then I think in Washington, I mean, Alex brings up some good points about the politics of this issue. The only other thing I would add to what he said is that if you're President Biden and you're coming up on midterm elections, I mean North Korea policy is not where you want to go to rock the boat looking for a foreign policy win. No American president should ever go in on North Korea policy looking for a win to shore up their political hopes. So you get the sense that everything that's happening right now, there's a big focus on China at the National Security Council and across the Interagency. North Korea is a bit of a sideshow, frankly speaking. I mean as long as the issue is contained, as long as Kim Jong-un doesn't go back to nuclear testing or long-range missile testing, we'll continue to say the same things that we have
been saying for a few months now since the policy review, but we'll keep on caring on and focusing on other issues in the region.

It's not a very optimistic assessment of what we're likely to see, but it's also not the most pessimistic that I could offer at this point. I think the North Koreans are going to continue to muddle along and we're going to continue to muddle along. My hope is that if and when we get to the end of Kim Jong-un's planned period of modernization and we do return to the diplomatic table, which I do think is inevitable. That's just been the history of this relationship we've had. The song and dance with North Korea goes on and on and we end up back at the table. My hope is when it happens the next time we'll be in a better position, but I'm just worried that Kim keeps racking up these cards that bring him back to the negotiating table with a better hand each time even if we continue to implement the sanctions that we have today.

Patrick Cronin:

Thank you very much. Only with North Korea can we say a not worst-case scenario is somewhat optimistic, but nonetheless, you're right. I think that's a reasonable, realistic assessment, Ankit. Really good set of comments. Jean, your final thoughts.

Jean Lee:

Yeah. North Korea will continue to build its nuclear program. There's no doubt about that and I think they will continue to utilize cyber as a way to both create uncertainty and unrest as well as to raise the funds that it needs. What I hope is happening is that the Biden administration is constructing a comprehensive strategy that puts North Korea within its Indo-Pacific strategy and that these meetings that we saw in the region in Northeast Asia, including with China, yield some sort of a unified stance among both North Korea's foes and its friends because I really feel that that is perhaps an effective way to draw North Korea out of isolation and bring them back to the negotiating table.

Because I think what we need to do is look for the opportunities, look for a face-saving way for the North Koreans to come back, and so we have to think in terms of what it is the North Koreans need, what Kim Jong-un needs to tell his people that this was the right time and finding a way, even as you're countering China, to engage China on this particular issue of North Korea is going to be really interesting. I was thinking that the Beijing Olympics might be that opportunity and then, of course, the IOC banned North Korea as a country from competing, but we'll see, are there opportunities where China can play a kind of host and perhaps draw North Korea out of isolation.

I think I'm pessimistic just in the sense that I do believe North Korea's going to continue on nuclear weapons development and cyber, but I do hope and trust that the Biden administration and other countries are working together to try to come up with a strategy that is more unified and might compel North Korea to the negotiating table when the time is right for North Korea.

Patrick Cronin:

Alex, your final thoughts.

Alex Wong:

Yeah. Patrick, you mentioned Afghanistan and what that means for our allies in the Indo-Pacific and in our partners in the Indo-Pacific. I think from an analytical matter, what the Afghanistan withdrawal says about the US commitment to the Indo-Pacific, I think they're completely separate. I don't think it really has an implication for what our commitments are to our allies there as well as our other partners. But put aside the analytical perspective, I can see why if you are a country, a medium-size country, a small
country in the Indo-Pacific who sits geographically next to the largest country in the world where you have historical tensions with and your strongest partner is thousands of miles away, I can see why looking at an Afghanistan you would worry because you're constantly looking for signs of what the commitment of the United States is over the medium and long term.

Now, that means that the United States has to do a lot of diplomatic state work here. We have to reassure our partners, reassure our allies, indicate to them that our commitment has no connection to what we have seen in Afghanistan. But I'll say this. To the extent that that worry leads certain partners and allies to make greater investments in their own military capabilities and capabilities that are geared towards defending their maritime space in particular, that could in the end be a good thing. But it will be a bad thing if we start seeing our partners and allies hedge economically and politically, which makes it harder for us to satisfy our strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. That's something I worry about and I think is a real big job now for the State Department and others in the Biden administration.

Patrick Cronin:
Alex, those are great comments. All of you, thank you so much, Ankit and Jean and Alex, for helping to put in context the recent flurry of events. Because I think we shouldn't hyperventilate over these sort of missile launches and tests, but at the same time they are worrisome. They are part of what Ankit suggests could be a new military modernization campaign and what Jean has rightly said will be almost assuredly a continuation of the nuclear and cyber programs. Alex, I think you're right as well. Post-Afghanistan, even unrelated, there may be extra shoulders that we can lean on in the region to provide local and regional security.

One of the big questions, of course, that we didn't discuss, and I hate to end on this note of Taiwan, is that if the Taiwan crisis were to flare up, that obviously has not only huge implications for US-China relations and China relations with Japan and the neighbors, but it then creates a completely different regional environment in which North Korea's operating and it's also presumably somewhat neglected in that sort of scenario as well. But that's a topic for another day, another day we'll be discussing soon at the Hudson Institute. On behalf of Hudson, I want to thank you all for joining this program on Kim Jong-un and the potential for an arms competition in Northeast Asia. Thank you very much.