

## North Korea: One Impulse for Trump to Heed

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By [Leon V. Sigal](#)

He will be urged to pick up where his predecessor left off: refuse to enter into negotiations unless the North first commits to denuclearizing completely and takes steps to demonstrate it is serious about that commitment. He also will be told to continue ratcheting up sanctions in a vain effort to force Pyongyang to the negotiating table on U.S. terms.



That advice is tantamount to wishing away Washington's current predicament in hopes of somehow going back to the future.

### **Looming Threat**

President Barack Obama's stance of "strategic patience"—pressure without negotiations—rested on the dubious premise that time was on Washington's side. His successor does not have that luxury.

North Korea's fifth nuclear test may have yielded a nuclear device that can be mounted on a missile, although a few more tests still may be needed to prove its reliability. The North's reactor at Yongbyon is fitfully generating more spent fuel, a refurbished reprocessing facility has just turned that spent fuel into plutonium, a new reactor is nearing completion, and its uranium-enrichment

program, an alternative route to produce the explosive material for a nuclear bomb, has expanded. At its current pace, Pyongyang could have enough fissile material for more than 40 nuclear weapons by 2021.

Pyongyang is also test-launching new missiles, its intermediate-range Musudan and a new submarine-launched ballistic missile that could circumvent the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system that is soon to be deployed in South Korea. A KN-08 ballistic missile is assessed to be capable of reaching the United States. Without testing, neither Washington nor Pyongyang can be sure of its range or reliability, but leader Kim Jong Un now said in his New Year address January 1 that his country is in the “final state of preparation”<sup>1</sup> for the test launch of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM).

“Won’t happen,” Trump responded in a January 2 tweet.<sup>2</sup>

So what will Trump do to head off that looming threat?

### Trump’s Impulses

Trump’s campaign rhetoric was contradictory, yielding few cues about what his North Korea policy might be. He has disparaged Kim as a “total nut job” and a “madman playing around with the nukes.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, he also expressed willingness to sit down and talk with him. “Who the hell cares? I’ll speak to anybody,” Trump said. “There’s a 10 percent or 20 percent chance I could talk him out of having his damn nukes, because who the hell wants him to have nukes?”<sup>4</sup>

Trump’s rhetoric was often impulsive, but it may be worth looking at the impulses he repeatedly revealed.

*Tougher sanctions.* The favorite prescription of the foreign policy establishment is to tighten sanctions. To appear to do something while failing to tackle a difficult political problem is the classic stance of Washington insiders.

Yet, sanctions may have less appeal to an anti-establishment outsider such as Trump and for good reason. Sanctions have enjoyed far less success against North Korea than against Iran. As the experience of negotiating with Iran suggests, moreover, relaxing sanctions may help stanch nuclear arming better than tightening them.

Although UN sanctions have impeded weapons trade with North Korea, the evidence suggests that they have not done much to hamper North Korea’s economy, which has continued to grow at a modest pace over the past decade. Its foreign trade persists despite efforts of the U.S. Department of the Treasury to cut off its access to banks around the globe, suggesting that *hawala*, the informal networks of brokers and middlemen who move money for clients in countries with large Muslim populations in the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia, and similar middlemen in China have picked up some of the slack. Unlike oil-rich Iran, North Korea does not have many big-ticket items to buy or sell, making letters of credit from international banks less of a necessity.

In a world where money flows more freely than water, trying to plug the many leaks seems doomed to fail. North Koreans may denounce financial sanctions as a sign of U.S. hostile intent, but they are crying all the way around the banks.

*Let China do it.* Another favorite prescription in Washington is to outsource the North Korean problem to China. That misreads Pyongyang’s purpose: it has long sought to improve relations with the United States, South Korea, and Japan as a hedge against overdependence on China for its security and prosperity. Nothing threatens Pyongyang more than cooperation between Washington and Beijing. When Washington and Beijing applied concerted pressure on Pyongyang, the North responded with nuclear tests in 2006, 2009, 2013, and 2016 in an effort to drive them apart.

During his campaign, Trump repeatedly voiced support for letting China deal with Kim. “I would get China to make that guy disappear, in one form or another, very quickly,” Trump told CBS. “China has absolute control of North Korea. They won’t say it, but they do, and they should make that problem

disappear.”<sup>5</sup> As it has demonstrated over many years, China has no interest in making Kim or North Korea disappear, which limits how much pressure it is willing to apply on Pyongyang by imposing stringent sanctions.

At the same time as he wants China’s help with North Korea, Trump has shown an impulse to pick a fight with China over trade and Taiwan. How will that help persuade China to step up pressure on Pyongyang, let alone “make that guy disappear”? “They don’t live and they don’t breathe without China,” he said of Pyongyang. “They wouldn’t get anything without China. China has the power, and we have to tell China to straighten out the situation,” Trump told Fox News. “We have power over China because of trade. Frankly, if we ever stopped it, believe me you would see a depression in China like you have never seen a depression before.”<sup>6</sup> Yet, such a depression might also reduce U.S. growth and imperil South Korea and Japan, whose economies depend heavily on trade with China. And threatening to break the commitment to a one-China policy is likely to encourage Beijing to prop up Pyongyang.

*Regime change.* South Korean President Park Geun-hye’s current passion for regime change has impeded U.S. efforts to open negotiations, but she is being forced out of office. Ironically, regime change seems to have come to Washington and Seoul sooner than to Pyongyang.

Yet, if Trump follows Park’s lead and waits for North Korea’s collapse, he will likely face a North Korea with many more nuclear warheads able to be delivered by missiles, some possibly capable of reaching the U.S. heartland, before his first term ends.

By then, if not before, Trump will hear siren calls to launch a preventive war to keep North Korea from fielding ICBMs armed with nuclear warheads, as if U.S. intelligence could pinpoint the locations of all the warheads in that tunnel-riven land.

For a president who, as a candidate, repeatedly criticized U.S. military intervention abroad and was skeptical of alliances, that option might be particularly unpalatable.<sup>7</sup>

*Negotiation.* Trump’s strongest impulse is to approach international politics as transactional and to regard himself as a peerless deal-breaker and deal-maker. He first broached the idea of talking to Kim on January 6, the very day that North Korea conducted its fourth test of a nuclear device.

“You have this madman over there who probably would use it, and nobody talks to him other than, of course, Dennis Rodman,” he told “Fox and Friends.” “But nobody is talking to him whatsoever, and nobody is discussing it with China.”<sup>8</sup> In a May 17 interview with Reuters, he revealed a willingness to sit down personally with Kim, saying, “I would have no problem speaking to him.”<sup>9</sup> In a campaign appearance in California on June 6, he was dismissive of experts’ “qualms about bargaining with North Korea.” To the practitioner of “The Art of the Deal,” that posed “no problems at all.” Not one to suffer critics gladly, Trump added, “They say ‘we would never, ever, talk.’ How foolish they are!”<sup>10</sup>

Nine days later, at a rally in Atlanta, he doubled down on the need for talks, saying he was prepared to host Kim, although he would forgo the usual diplomatic niceties. “If he came here, I’d accept him, but I wouldn’t give him a state dinner like we do for China and all these other people that rip us off when we give ‘em these big state dinners. We give them state dinners like you’ve never seen. We shouldn’t have dinners at all. We should be eating a hamburger on a conference table, and we should make better deals with China and others.”<sup>11</sup>

If he follows that instinct, he has to act sooner rather than later. The longer he waits, the greater the North’s bargaining leverage will be. Deferring negotiations until the North commits to complete denuclearization and takes unilateral steps to that end would be a waste of time. The urgent task is to induce Pyongyang to suspend arming now.

### Past Agreements

Suspending the North Korean nuclear program has been the thrust of all three agreements that the United States has made with North Korea: the 1994 Agreed Framework; the September 19, 2005, six-party joint statement; and the 2012 Leap Day deal. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the first two

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accords had some success.<sup>12</sup> The 1994 accord halted all fissile material production in the North for more than nine years until the George W. Bush administration seized on U.S. intelligence reports that Pyongyang was secretly acquiring the means to enrich uranium and used those reports to scrap the accord without bothering to probe the North's offer to negotiate the issue.

The 2005 accord was nearly stillborn when two days before the accord was finalized, the U.S. Treasury Department threatened sanctions on all banks that did business with North Korea, prompting authorities in Macao to seize North Korean funds at Banco Delta Asia. Shortly after North Korea conducted its first nuclear test in October 2006, Washington agreed to arrange for the return of the funds; and Pyongyang ceased all fissile material production at Yongbyon and nuclear tests and missile test-launches, only to have the deal fall apart in 2009 after South Korea failed to deliver promised energy aid.

The Leap Day deal collapsed almost immediately when North Korea proceeded with a satellite launch attempt in 2013 despite a U.S. warning that such a move would be a deal-breaker.

Given that history, trying for a suspension yet one more time would face formidable political opposition in Washington and Seoul. Opponents would demand that no deal be made unless Pyongyang first commits to denuclearization, which it insists it will not do. Delaying a possible suspension of the North's programs while seeking an unlikely commitment to give up its weapons is to sacrifice the practical on the altar of the theoretical, and trying for a permanent dismantling of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs would take much more substantial inducements and consume precious time.

In short, without giving up the U.S. goal of denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, negotiations have to start somewhere. Insisting on a more comprehensive deal while the North's programs proceed apace does not make much strategic sense.

## **Next Steps**

Washington understandably cannot keep negotiating while North Korea continues arming. Recent unofficial contacts indicate that Pyongyang seems open to talks about talks so long as it does not have to satisfy U.S. preconditions unilaterally. The subject of such talks would be a suspension of Pyongyang's programs and the reciprocal steps that Washington would take to address its security concerns, along the lines of "action for action" as set forth in the September 19, 2005, joint statement.

The North might be willing to suspend arming. That was also the implication of its January 9, 2015, offer of "temporarily suspending the nuclear test over which the U.S. is concerned" if the United States "temporarily suspend[s] joint military exercises in South Korea and its vicinity this year."<sup>13</sup>

A one-year suspension would not work. What would happen when that year was up? Would exercises have to be suspended permanently to keep the North from testing? The North may be amenable to a reduction in the scale, scope, and operating tempo of the three largest U.S.-South Korean joint exercises instead. For instance, if it were forgoing nuclear tests, there would be less need to fly B-52s into South Korean airspace to reassure U.S. allies. Similarly, mock attacks on nuclear sites and leadership targets could be avoided as needlessly provocative.

Both sides would have to agree to do more. Pyongyang might be willing to suspend not only nuclear testing, but also missile tests and possibly satellite launches and verifiably stop fissile material production. In return, Washington could suspend the application of all sanctions that predate the North's nuclear program, reaffirm its commitments in the October 2000 U.S.-North Korean joint communiqué renouncing "hostile intent" and pledging to build "a new relationship free from past enmity," commit to respect the North's sovereignty and not interfere in its internal affairs, and, after consulting with Seoul, agree to commence a peace process on the Korean peninsula.

Yet, the chances of persuading North Korea to go beyond another temporary freeze and dismantle its nuclear and missile programs are slim without firm commitments from Washington and Seoul to move toward political and economic normalization, engage in a peace process to end the Korean

War, and negotiate regional security arrangements, among them a nuclear-weapon-free zone that would provide a multilateral legal framework for denuclearization. Trump's willingness to hold out the prospect of a summit with Kim would also be a significant inducement. Doubts about his enduring commitment to the alliance, however, could intensify Seoul's resistance to engaging in a peace process.

Suspension would leave North Korea with a rudimentary deterrent, but it would forestall unbounded weapons programs with profoundly destabilizing effect on the balance of power in Northeast Asia.

### Outlook

If all else fails and North Korea continues to arm, the fallback position of many in Washington is to bolster deterrence and contain it. For others, that is not enough. Yet, Trump's indisposition to military intervention and skepticism about alliances<sup>14</sup> seem to rule out some of the more forceful options being bruited about in Washington.

Impulses are not policies, but they may provide clues to Trump's inclinations. If he follows his impulse to talk, he could succeed where Presidents Obama and George W. Bush have failed. North Korea's arming is now unbounded. Temporary suspension of its nuclear and missile programs, if possible, would have huge benefits for U.S. and allied security and could open the way to a gradual improvement in relations with North Korea that would ease its insecurity and facilitate more permanent dismantlement of its weapons programs.

Perhaps Trump could get there if he starts from here.

### ENDNOTES

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2. Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger, "'It Won't Happen,' Trump Says of North Korean Missile Test," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2017.
3. Donald Trump, *On the Record*, Fox News, January 7, 2016.
4. Maxwell Tani, "Donald Trump on North Korean Dictator Kim Jong Un: 'If He Came Here, I'd Accept Him,'" *Business Insider*, June 15, 2016; Steve Holland and Emily Flitter, "Trump Would Talk to North Korea's Kim, Renegotiate Climate Treaty," *Reuters*, May 17, 2016.
5. Donald Trump, *This Morning*, CBS, February 10, 2016.
6. Donald Trump, "On the Record," Fox News, January 7, 2016.
7. Trump has said,

We're basically protecting Japan, and we are, every time North Korea raises its head, you know, we get calls from Japan and we get calls from everybody else, and "Do something." And there'll be a point at which we're just not going to be able to do it anymore. Now, does that mean nuclear? It could mean nuclear.... [A]t some point, we cannot be the policeman of the world. And unfortunately, we have a nuclear world now. And you have, Pakistan has them. You have, probably, North Korea has them. I mean, they don't have delivery yet, but you know, probably, I mean to me, that's a big problem. And, would I rather have North Korea have them with Japan sitting there having them also? You may very well be better off if that's the case.

Maggie Haberman and David E. Sanger, "Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views," *The New York Times*, March 26, 2016. See "Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey's Coup Attempt and the World," *The New York Times*, July 21, 2016.

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12. For a history of the negotiations, see Leon V. Sigal, "What Have Twenty-Five Years of Nuclear Diplomacy Achieved?" in *Pathways to a Peaceful Korean Peninsula: Denuclearization, Reconciliation and Cooperation*, ed. Jeong-ho Roh (Seoul: Korean Institute of National Unification) (forthcoming).
13. Korean Central News Agency (KCNA), "KCNA Report," January 10, 2015.
14. For instance, Haberman and Sanger, "Transcript: Donald Trump Expounds on His Foreign Policy Views."

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**Leon V. Sigal** is director of the Northeast Asia Cooperative Security Project at the Social Science Research Council in New York and author of *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy With North Korea* (1997).

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