

The State of Play in North Korea

by Phillip Orchard - January 4, 2021

In a White House meeting just weeks before Donald Trump's inauguration, then-President Barack Obama warned the president-elect that the North Korean nuclear threat would be the thorniest national security challenge he would inherit. Kim Jong Un then welcomed Trump to office with nearly two dozen ballistic missile tests in 2017 alone, showing off increasingly sophisticated capabilities with each, including solid-fuel engines and a pair of intercontinental ballistic missiles. So Trump moved with gusto to abandon the more cautious and conventional but generally futile approaches of his predecessors. His administration tried "maximum pressure," pairing crippling U.N. sanctions with an all-out effort to communicate that it was serious about going to war to end the North's nuclear threat. It tried diplomacy by personal rapport, breaking precedent with a trio of historic summits between Trump and Kim. Then it tried basically ignoring the North for a couple of years.

But while Trump made a lot of history, the situation with North Korea is essentially the same as it was four years ago. The North's nuclear and missile programs are still humming, and Pyongyang is under intense pressure to leverage these for economic and strategic gain. If anything, North Korea is at once stronger and more desperate – a dangerous combination.

No Small Thing

The Trump administration's biggest success with North Korea was a tacit agreement involving a freeze on the North's tests of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) and nuclear weapons in exchange for reduced joint U.S.-South Korean drills, which, **from Pyongyang's point of view**, are indistinguishable from preparations for an invasion. This was no small thing. It disrupted a dangerous spiral of escalation. It stopped the North's attempts to master reentry technology, **the most difficult part of ICBM development**. And it created space for the two sides to begin a slow, painstaking process of establishing trust, implementing confidence-building measures and taking small steps toward a fundamentally new security relationship both could live with.

But **the process never gained traction**, and Trump's attempt at forging a grand bargain with Kim ultimately fell short. Put simply, the U.S. didn't have enough leverage to force North Korea to capitulate and make sweeping concessions it couldn't tolerate. And Pyongyang didn't have enough leverage to scare the U.S. so much that it would back off its demands for complete, verifiable and irreversible denuclearization.

So long as the U.S. wasn't willing to go to war with a notoriously unpredictable nuclear-armed state, "maximum pressure" was reduced to things Pyongyang had a long history of shrugging off. Isolation, sanctions and flattery just weren't going to get the Kim regime to abandon a nuclear program it sees as strategically invaluable, indispensable to the regime's hold on power, and something that has, for perhaps the first time in generations, allowed it to negotiate from a position of strength. Even so, the U.S. had little reason to worry about the North actually using its weapons so long as Pyongyang didn't believe a U.S. attack was imminent. This meant the U.S. could effectively ignore the North after the third Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi fell apart, moving the goalposts on what it defined as success and shifting focus to **bigger strategic concerns in the region**.

Still, North Korea stuck to the deal for a number of reasons. For one, it thought Trump had significant political interest in signing a grand bargain, making him more likely to deal than his potential successor. For another, pausing tests of long-range missiles (while launching short-range ones) benefited Pyongyang because **it further stressed** an already-strained U.S. alliance structure in Northeast Asia – as did **the continued pause in U.S.-South Korean drills**. Moreover, the deal didn't require Pyongyang to truly give up anything of substance. If and when it felt compelled to return to its familiar pattern of ratcheting up tension whenever it wanted international attention, there was very little stopping it from resuming long-range missile tests.

Square One, Again

The Biden administration would probably be content to keep the status quo in place and focus on the many, many **more pressing priorities** on its plate. But it's doubtful that North Korea will be similarly patient. 2020 was a really bad year for Pyongyang. Trade with China fell by an estimated 75 percent after the COVID-19 pandemic forced the North to close its borders. The loss of raw material imports reportedly led to an alarming drop in factory activity, spikes in food prices and wild swings in the value of North Korea's currency, according to South Korean intelligence. In October, Kim stunned Korea watchers with a tearful apology for failing to deliver on his economic promises.

To be clear, the North has an extraordinary ability to withstand international isolation and domestic

privation. Nothing that happened this year – not even **the weird stretch when Kim kept disappearing from the public eye for weeks at a time** – gives any reason to think the regime is on the brink of collapse. Thus, the continued sanctions should not be viewed as an existential threat to the regime's survival. If it felt that its best play was to continue abiding by the tacit deal brokered in 2018, it likely could. But it's hard to come up with reasons it would think continued compliance is its best play.

So in all likelihood, North Korea will greet Biden's arrival in the White House in a similar manner it did Trump – as well as Obama, whose first four months in office saw the North test its longest-range missile to date, withdraw from the Six-Party Talks and conduct its second nuclear test. Around the time Biden is inaugurated on Jan. 20, Kim is expected to preside over a rare major Party Congress. Don't be surprised if it produces a fairly explicit message about Pyongyang's plans and expectations from the United States. And if Pyongyang does not feel the Biden administration is paying sufficient attention and/or is ready to budge on sanctions relief, expect there to be an escalating series of provocations intended to nudge Washington back to the negotiating table. After all, the North already unveiled a massive new missile at a military parade last fall. Whenever Pyongyang shows off a new rocket, tests tend to follow shortly thereafter. If and when they do, the U.S. and North Korea will be **back at square one**, again.

No Shame

Naturally, this raises the question of whether meaningful progress on curbing the North Korean threat is even possible for the Biden administration – or any administration, for that matter. There are any number of reasons to be pessimistic.

Consider the following factors working against U.S. negotiators: The North has a long history of breaking hard-negotiated agreements on its nuclear program. Its economic interests have never been prioritized over regime survival or national defense. Indeed, it's **almost wholly dependent economically on another outside power** that wants it to denuclearize (China) – and yet is incapable of doing much about it. A rapid **“opening up” to the outside world** is seen as an intolerable threat to regime control, making integration-related inducements futile. The nuclear program legitimizes the regime with the masses, which the regime has conditioned to see themselves as permanently under siege by foreign enemies. It's immensely popular with elite hardliners, military brass and the national security apparatus – most of whom live lives of luxury and **whose steadfast support Kim needs to rule**. And, above all, the nuclear program has passed the point of being aspirational, and the window for eliminating it with military action has realistically

closed. The North has hundreds of nukes and an ever-expanding arsenal of delivery mechanisms. No one can take them from it at an acceptable cost.

So there's no shame in failing to get the North to denuclearize. But this doesn't mean a lesser agreement that reduces the North's nuclear threat – that is, something meant to limit the shape and size of the North's arsenal – is impossible. Nor does it mean that Pyongyang isn't capable or willing to negotiate in earnest. The **North demonstrated as much** beginning in 2018, when it opened a slow and halting but substantive **reconciliation process with the South**. This, in turn, opened the window for the Kim-Trump bromance. The North may have grossly miscalculated just **how much it could get from the Trump administration** at the meeting in Hanoi, but post-summit purges of the North's negotiating team suggested that Pyongyang wasn't acting entirely in bad faith.

Its missile and nuclear programs are big enough now that **aspects could be negotiated away** without making it feel too exposed and vulnerable. It doesn't need ICBMs if it feels a fundamentally new security relationship – one that somehow makes it feel the threat of invasion by the U.S. or one of its allies is reduced to manageable levels for good – can be established. And while it may not give its economic interests priority over national defense and regime security, its economic interests are still important enough to function as crucial sweeteners in any deal. The devil is absolutely in the details here, and it will require an achingly slow, sustained process to get them right.

But there's enough pieces of a potential deal in play to make it worthwhile to keep talking, and Pyongyang won't abide silence from the Biden administration anyway. It just won't happen with a framework centered on complete denuclearization. North Korea is a nuclear state and has the ability to demand to be treated as such. If negotiations move forward in any meaningful way, that'll be the new basis of understanding.

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