

## How can a military conflict in the Korean Peninsula be avoided?

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### Theme

This analysis warns of the growing risk of armed conflict in the Korean Peninsula and sets out some options for avoiding it and proceeding towards an agreement that would enable the precarious stability of the region to be underpinned.

### Summary

Military tension is nothing new in the Korean Peninsula. North Korea has been responsible for numerous armed incidents in recent decades; that these did not escalate is due to the fact that the conventional military superiority of South Korea and its US ally contained North Korean bellicosity. The containment scenario is no longer valid as North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes have steadily progressed and now the Korean Peninsula finds itself in an unstable situation where any error of judgement or impulsive move could provoke not only armed conflict but also nuclear escalation. In a context marked by the problems faced by the international community to contain North Korean proliferation and by an increase in hostile declarations and the deployment of forces, this analysis sets out the need to adopt dissuasive and tension-reducing measures that could, first, avoid aggravating the current situation and, secondly, make progress towards freezing proliferation at its current levels and constructing a negotiating framework that would make it sustainable.

### Analysis

#### How did we get here?

The current situation has been brewing thanks to commission on the part of the North Korean authorities and omission on the part of the regional powers, which have left unchecked what is now an imminent risk factor for regional security: that of a military confrontation in which conventional and nuclear arms may be used.

It is thought that Pyongyang started to develop a clandestine nuclear arms programme at the start of the 1980s, which it later accelerated at three moments of particular insecurity for the North Korean regime: the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, its inclusion in the so-called 'axis of evil' by George W. Bush in 2002 and Kim Jong-un's ascent to power following the death of his father. In the first two cases, international diplomatic efforts were made in both the 1994 Agreed Framework and the Six-party Talks

(2003-09) that failed in their attempt to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear programme in exchange for economic aid and security guarantees. Since 2011 the North Korean regime has sped up its programmes aimed at crossing the nuclear threshold (see Table 1) and reformed its constitution to institutionalise its nuclear programme and strengthen the legitimacy of Kim Jong-un's leadership. The initial goal of de-nuclearising the Korean Peninsula is therefore no longer viable and those who were seeking to avoid it will now have to choose between military steps that disrupt or terminate the programmes already underway (counter-proliferation) or diplomatic steps that seek some form of accommodation with the new nuclear power (non-proliferation).

**Table 1. Record of North Korea missile launches (ML) and nuclear tests (NT)**

Year	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
ML	–	–	3	1	1	7	3	–	–	15	–	4	7	18	18	22	11
NT	–	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	1	–	–	–	1	–	–	2	–

Source: the authors' based on data from the IISS *Military Balance* and the *New York Times* as at 22/VI/2017.

Responsibility for arriving at this pass is shared across a range of actors. The chief culprits are the political and military leaders of North Korea, who continue believing and warning the population that there is going to be an external military intervention aimed at wiping out their regime, and have accordingly pushed forward with nuclear programmes on the grounds that their survival depends on them. Hence Pyongyang has stopped complying with the promises made to prevent proliferation and used such agreements to buy time and resources, all the while developing its nuclear programme, putting paid to the various talks processes that were underway.

For its part, the US has been vacillating on its policy towards North Korea, which at times has led it to renege on its commitments and accentuate mistrust in Pyongyang. Preoccupied with embarking upon and terminating other conflicts, recent US Presidents have not paid enough attention to North Korean proliferation. A striking example was Obama's so-called 'strategic patience', which barely put any obstacles in the way of the North Korean nuclear programme. Only after the diplomatic agreement with Iran was signed –and following the second nuclear test of 2016– were the sanctions placed on North Korea taken seriously. The North Korean regime has managed to get round these sanctions, emulating the 'Iranian way' of building up a network of logistical, financial and technological intermediaries who have nurtured the umbilical cord of proliferation. Now that President Trump has brought an end to the policy of strategic patience with North Korea and shown his preparedness to use force, the North Korean regime has more reasons for feeling insecure, but less to lose if an escalation should occur.

The North Korean nuclear programme would not have advanced in the way it has without the collaboration of its neighbours. First, China has allowed its ally to play the provocation card at the Six-party Talks table, supplying technology associated with proliferation, directly or through Chinese and Pakistani intermediaries who have provided technological, financial and logistical support to the proliferation programme. Secondly, South Korean governments have been prepared to grant economic incentives to

appease its northern neighbour. Although they have tried they have not succeeded in engaging the North Korean elites in any process of building mutual trust; on the contrary, their predisposition has raised doubts among their allies about the possibility that South Korea might jettison its friends in exchange for promises of reunification. Such doubts were evident in the recent election campaign when the then presidential candidate Moon Jae-in argued against the US taking unilateral decisions on North Korea and criticised the US deployment of its THAAD anti-ballistic missile defence system. As expected, since being elected he has shown himself to be more disposed to reopening talks with the north than his predecessor, the impeached Park Geun-hye.

### Why are we at a particularly sensitive moment?

Up until now, the risk of a widespread conventional conflict has been contained thanks to the military superiority of South Korea and its American ally. Despite the fact that North Korea wields considerable military might, it is one thing to provoke occasional armed incidents to shore up its threats and a quite different thing to launch a military escalation in which North Korea would have everything to lose. Now that the headway made in proliferation has shifted the conventional balance however, the North Korean leader and his military elite can afford to indulge in more aggressive shows of strength, knowing that they can make up for their conventional inferiority. When they reiterate that they will only use their nuclear weapons if they are attacked, what they affirm is that they are prepared to use them first and –more dangerous still– that their decision rests on a perception that may be removed from reality. Linking first nuclear use to a subjective perception increases the risk of a nuclear escalation in the Korean Peninsula because the decision does not emerge from a rational calculation of the risks stemming from the traditional nuclear powers but rather from the irrationality of the feelings of a small, recently elevated and inexperienced power in a complicated game of nuclear deterrence. By way of comparison, North Korea's first strike nuclear doctrine is similar to that of India's, but the likelihood of its being put into action is less of a concern on the India-Pakistan border than in the Korean Peninsula.

Secondly, while North Korea is developing its nuclear and ballistic capacity at an ever-increasing rate, its openness to being dissuaded is limited and this presents the US with the dilemma of whether or not to launch a pre-emptive attack. At the time of writing it is estimated that North Korea has between 10 and 20 nuclear weapons; it has demonstrated a range of up to 1,000km for its short- and medium-range missiles (Scud-ER and NoDong) and of up to 500km for submarine-launched missiles (Bukkeukseong-1 and KN-11). It has also shown its capacity to achieve ranges greater than 4,000km with new-generation intermediate-range missiles, overcoming the shortfalls of the earlier Hwasong-10/Musudan, although its intercontinental ballistic missiles (Hwasong-13/14 and KN-08/14) are not capable of reaching the continental mainland of the US. Similarly, it has not yet demonstrated a capacity to miniaturise nuclear warheads or to solve the problems of warhead re-entry once their trajectories have taken them beyond Earth's atmosphere. However –despite the firm belief that the advances that had been claimed were false and the targets were beyond their range–, the most recent tests, in April 2017, confirm that unexpected progress has been made on high-thrust engine technologies based on old Soviet ballistic missiles. If new tests on these engines over coming months confirm the advance, the existing KN 08 and 14 ballistic missiles could reach distances

in excess of 10,000km within three or four years, placing US territory within their range. Indeed, as its most recent launches on 13 and 21 May 2017 show, North Korea is taking advantage of its intermediate-range ballistic missile (IRBM) tests to develop its intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) covertly. And while the US awaits an intercontinental test to justify a possible preventative attack, North Korea increases the height, distance, reliability and re-entry security of its missiles using tests with its intermediate missiles. It is also seeking to improve its capacity to overwhelm the THAAD defence system directed against its missiles by increasing the number of simultaneous firings, and to reduce the US capacity for anticipation by improving the mobility and concealment of its launchers and reducing the time that transport vehicles require to carry out launches. These are advances that reduce the window of opportunity for carrying out a pre-emptive attack.

Finally, the risk is heightened by the unpredictability of the behaviour of the North Korean and US leaders, who have proved their capacity to take bold decisions involving the use of force. President Trump has left this door open in public statements in an unsuccessful attempt to put pressure on the North Korean authorities, with whom the current US Administration has embarked upon a psychological war. The statements have been accompanied by a deployment of military forces in the region that in some cases have served to strengthen his credibility, but others, such as the 'straying' of a carrier group towards Australia, have achieved the opposite effect. In an emotional atmosphere ripe for confrontation and devoid of a rational doctrine for using weapons of mass destruction, there is the risk that any error of judgement or ill-considered decision will trigger an uncontrollable conflict. At this stage of proceedings, no pre-emptive military strike could destroy, damage or seriously delay North Korea's nuclear capacity, but whatever its nature it would be the attack that the North Korean regime has been announcing for decades and for which millions of its citizens are prepared to die. In any event, in order to forestall it, North Korea boasts a wide repertory of responses that range from cyber-attacks, assassinations, kidnapping and the hybrid operations of the so-called 'grey zone' (a situation between war and peace that maintains military tension using planned activities triggering escalations) to nuclear holocaust by way of a conventional confrontation that would devastate the Korean Peninsula. Caught up in the dispute are not only the Korean peoples but also the troops stationed by the US in the region, who are turning into the hostages of the situation.

### What do the sides want?

Stabilisation depends on the parties to the dispute, because they have moulded the process prior to negotiation and they control the decisions of the UN Security Council, such that no other actor, including the EU, is able to influence the current situation.

The North Korean authorities view their nuclear programme as a key element in consolidating and maintaining themselves in power. First, the North Korean regime has identified a potential US intervention as the most likely scenario to trigger its immediate collapse, so the overriding goal of developing of its nuclear programme is to deter Washington from launching such an operation. From this it follows that any agreement seeking to contain the programme will need to include security guarantees from the US aimed at avoiding such an intervention. Secondly, Kim Jong-un has invoked North

Korea's development of a military nuclear programme to bolster his authority. This has involved a modification of the statutes of the Workers' Party of Korea, which has adopted the *byungjin* doctrine as its new central policy. The latter involves no longer prioritising the military and army and adopting a policy that seeks both a greater level of economic development and a credible nuclear deterrent. From this perspective, North Korea is looking for an agreement that grants it international recognition, even if it is implicit, as a nuclear power and that enables it to reactivate its economy through greater engagement in international trade. Attainment of this would not only boost the regime's security amid the prospect of a foreign intervention, but also substantially underpin Kim Jong-un's political capital as the great architect of such achievements.

The US, as a key player in the security of East Asia, is concerned about the threat the proliferation programmes pose to it and its allies in the region. It is also concerned by the risk of nuclear proliferation that could arise from the sale of nuclear material and technology by North Korea to other states and terrorist groups within and beyond the region (witness the North Korean provenance of the Syrian nuclear reactor destroyed by Israel in 2007 and the missiles found when the *So San* was boarded by Spanish Navy crew in 2002). For both reasons it has consistently been committed to de-nuclearisation.

China's main priority is to avoid the collapse of the North Korean regime, because, in addition to a possible refugee crisis, this would entail a process of reunification with South Korea on the terms laid down by Seoul and consequently China would have a land border with a country maintaining a security alliance with the US. To avoid this, Beijing continues to maintain a close economic relationship with Pyongyang and, according to official Chinese data, its trade with North Korea grew by 37.4% in the first quarter of 2017 compared with the same period of 2016. However, Beijing now openly opposes the development of North Korea's military nuclear and missile programme; first because it understands that maintaining a climate of stability in the region is beneficial both for Chinese economic development and for its international reputation, something that deteriorates when Pyongyang carries out nuclear and missile testing, causing such fundamental partners as the US, South Korea and Japan to identify Beijing as the accomplice to the situation. Moreover, it knows that this perception strengthens the ties that exist between them. Secondly, such programmes reduce North Korea's strategic dependence on China, which undercuts Beijing's capacity to influence its neighbour and, as a result, the strength of its position when it comes to negotiating with the US on this and other issues. Finally, North Korean proliferation has paved the way for the deployment of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile defence system in the Korean Peninsula, something of a strategic setback for China that it has tried to avoid by all means, including preventative cyber-attacks against South Korea.

South Korea itself wants tension with its northern neighbour defused and, eventually, a reunification in which it is able to maintain its political and economic system. Seoul is inclined more towards economic interaction with Pyongyang, and a gradual process of convergence between the two Koreas, than the use of force or seeking the immediate collapse of the North Korean regime, because Seoul would have to bear the greater part of the costs of reunification and a possible refugee crisis. For its part, Japan feels threatened because it knows that the US bases on its territory would be the most likely target of any hypothetical North Korean nuclear attack, hence the great emphasis it

places on ending the North Korean nuclear programme. The Japanese are also concerned that one of the missiles tested by Pyongyang over the Sea of Japan could accidentally or deliberately reach Japanese soil. From their perspective, it would be desirable for any agreement negotiated with North Korea to address the issue of Japanese citizens kidnapped by North Korean agents in the 1970s and 80s. Both countries harbour nationalist factions that advocate wielding their own nuclear deterrence, which could cease being a minority view if US deterrence fails to work or if they have to pay too high a price for it, a prospect that Donald Trump, when still a presidential candidate, once floated.

The Russian position on the Korean Peninsula consists of strengthening its role as a strategic actor and an indispensable interlocutor in East Asia. Like Beijing, Moscow condemns Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests, but is opposed to armed intervention and, in particular, regime-change by force. Given that both in Iraq in 2003 and in Libya in 2011 the economic isolation of these countries was a prior step to military intervention to force a political regime change, both Russia and China reject isolating North Korea economically and support only selective economic sanctions, while maintaining major economic ties with Pyongyang.

#### How can the situation be stabilised?

Finding a solution to this situation is enormously difficult, owing to the diverging interests of the parties involved, as summarised above. There needs to be an agreement in which all sides gain something, because only then will the parties be able to sustain it, thereby giving rise to a security regime that, although precarious and limited, would avoid the dangers involved in prolonging the current dynamic. When it comes to opening up a pathway to stabilise the zone, it seems inadvisable to take either the military route or to open up a political dialogue based merely on offering economic inducements in exchange for commitments from Pyongyang. The latter course has already been explored by various South Korean governments, including that of Roh Moo-hyun; one of the latter's advisors was the current President-elect, Moon Jae-in, who therefore knows its limitations at first hand.

The solution will need to combine an effective sanctions regime, aimed at slowing down the development of the North Korean nuclear and missile programmes, and a political agreement that offers Pyongyang sufficient security guarantees in exchange for the suspension of its military nuclear and missile programme. For the former, the existing international sanctions could be broadened and deepened and –above all– their fulfilment enforced, with a view to hindering the nuclear proliferation as much as possible. Since the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2270, the challenge of the US Administration has been to dismantle the network of ministries, individuals, banks, ships, aircraft and suppliers that feed into the proliferation programme. Up until now, China has turned a blind eye in the belief that it had the neighbouring dynasty under its control, but now that the latest Kim has decided to strike out on his own, it could contain the escalation if it collaborated in implementing sanctions (something it has only done when the US authorities have targeted sanctions against Chinese interests).

It should not be expected, however, that the Chinese will start to perceive North Korea as a greater threat to their security than the US, thereby changing a basic tenet of China's geopolitics. They could do so if US pressure on their economic interests or the drift towards war on the part of the North Koreans became more pronounced, but otherwise they will resist applying sanctions that affect Chinese companies, individuals and regions living off trade –both licit and illicit– with North Korea. It is a trade that feeds the proliferation programmes and maintains the lifestyle of its ruling elite.

In any event it should be borne in mind that the sanctions are not an end in themselves, but rather an instrument against nuclear proliferation and need to be complemented by a political dialogue geared principally towards freezing the existing programmes. It cannot be a precondition of dialogue that Pyongyang completely renounces its nuclear weapons because, as already pointed out, North Korea's leaders know that they need these programmes to avoid regime change and in order to be respected in their talks with regional powers. Therefore, the best option would be to give acknowledgement, *de facto* at least, to this reality and look for an agreement aimed at freezing the North Korean military nuclear programme, something that is especially important with regard to the miniaturisation of nuclear warheads and the development of intercontinental missiles. Acknowledgement would stabilise the current situation and enable the parties to derive minimal face-saving incentives, abandoning the all-or-nothing stances that have proved fruitless. The Iranian model has some usefulness but cannot be applied wholesale because the circumstances and the players are different. The final outcome has the potential to be similarly desirable for the Korean Peninsula: military de-escalation, a moratorium on proliferation, the resumption of dialogue and an improvement in the affected populations' quality of life. In the much more distant future there lies the prospect, in both cases, of a stable and definitive solution.

## Conclusions

The spiral of tension in the Korean Peninsula and East Asia will not abate as long as North Korea continues, as it has been doing in the last four years, to make swift progress on its nuclear capabilities and missile systems. The series of condemnatory resolutions passed by the Security Council since 2006 against North Korea's nuclear testing and launches of ballistic missiles, combined with a growing but leaky sanctions regime, has not succeeded in halting the proliferation.

To date all the initiatives to persuade the North Korean authorities that it would be more beneficial to renounce their nuclear programme than maintain it, whether through threats or inducements, have foundered. There is no way of succeeding because they know that the programme is the only guarantee to avoid foreign intervention, ensure even-handed talks with the regional powers and prolong the regime's survival. Attempting military action to avoid this has few chances of success and could create a humanitarian and security crisis on a vast scale. In this situation, reaching an agreement that is not ideal and seeks suspension rather than de-nuclearisation is preferable to prolonging the current situation, in which North Korea continues developing its nuclear capabilities and missiles at great speed.

Such a hypothetical agreement, freezing North Korea's programmes and verifying its compliance by means of periodic international inspections, would enable the current tension to be defused. The agreement would not put an end to the structural problems posed by North Korea's relations with its neighbours, but it could be the start of a new talks process with the potential of finding a solution of greater scope, one that reflects the new strategic reality.