

# **North Korea Policy: Why the Obama Administration is Right and the Critics Are Wrong**

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## **Introduction**

North Korea has been very much in the news since the beginning of this year and, with President Obama soon to leave office, I thought it might be worthwhile to review the Obama administration's North Korea policy and the criticism of it.

It has become increasingly clear that Pyongyang aims to be able to credibly threaten the American homeland itself with nuclear attack, and it has made considerable progress in that direction. Indeed, it already claims that it can. The next American president will thus come into office in January concerned that Pyongyang may achieve its goal during her tenure. So, early on, she will conduct a policy review to take a fresh look at Pyongyang's capabilities and intentions in order to be able to decide her own policy toward the regime. An important aspect of that review will be an assessment of President Obama's policy and the criticism of it.

With North Korea having conducted a fourth nuclear test in January and demonstrated that its rockets can put satellites into orbit—if not yet missiles onto the lower 48 United States—many experts, academics, and journalists have flatly characterized the Obama administration's policy as a "failure."

My aim today is to address two key questions about such criticism. First, is the criticism itself well founded? And, second, are the policies proposed by critics likely to be more successful than the existing policy in meeting U.S. interests?

To get at these questions, I will begin by offering you my view of the roots of the North Korea problem and of North Korean intentions. Second, I will review U.S. policy, focusing on the Obama administration, and explain the parameters within which it has been formulated and implemented. Third, I will assess critics' arguments against the Obama administration's policy and the policies they propose. Finally, I will examine how the strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula is evolving and forecast how the next U.S. administration is likely to approach it. I will then look forward to learning from your questions and comments in the discussion period.

## **The Roots of the North Korea Problem, and Pyongyang's Intentions**

No useful discussion of North Korea policy is possible without a theory of the North Korean regime's intentions. It would be like treating a patient's symptoms without having first made a diagnosis. But the range of theories is wide.

The North Korean regime portrays itself as an utterly innocent victim of the United States, the South Korean "puppets" of the United States, and others under American sway. According to Pyongyang, the fundamental problem on the Korean Peninsula is American "hostility" toward it. The United States is an imperialist, capitalist society that cannot abide North Korea's noble form of government and has always been bent on destroying it. The United States launched the Korean War in 1950 and was defeated only by the efforts of the people of North Korea under the heroic leadership of Kim Il Sung. Since then the United States has repeatedly threatened to attack North Korea, including with nuclear weapons, and would have, had North Korea ever let down its guard. The increasing American threat left Pyongyang with no choice but to develop nuclear weapons as a deterrent against it. Without nuclear weapons, the United States would have again attacked North Korea, and the entire Korean nation, including the South, would have been devastated. If the United States would only drop its hostility to North Korea, everything would take care of itself. The United States must thus demonstrate that it is no longer hostile by signing a peace treaty with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The people of North and South Korea, if left to themselves, with no interference by the United States, would then peacefully unify.

At the other end of the spectrum in terms of a theory of North Korea's intentions are the views of South Korean conservatives. They see the regime as completely and irrevocably malevolent. To them, it is a Stalinist creation that features a communist system ruled by a dynasty resting on a cult of personality, something without parallel in today's world. Kim Il Sung colluded with the Soviets and the new PRC to launch the Korean War, lied about it to his own people, and was saved from utter defeat only by a massive PRC intervention. In the decades since, Pyongyang has never given up its dream of unifying the peninsula, whether through manipulation of South Korean society or by force. Just two decades ago, it allowed perhaps millions of its own people to starve rather than slightly reduce the priority it accords to the military in budget allocations. It would already have invaded South Korea again had it not been for South Koreans' efforts to develop their economy and military and for Seoul's alliance with the United States. Because North Korea saw itself falling ever further behind South Korea, it accelerated its nuclear weapons program to get its way with the United States and South Korea through nuclear threats.

Now, when it comes to international disputes, the default attitude of sophisticated people is that some fault probably lies on each side and that the truth falls somewhere in between. The less that sophisticated people know about a particular conflict, the likelier they are to assume that the blame is more or less equally shared. But of course that's not always the case. Most sophisticated people really don't know much about the Korea problem, and when they do occasionally study it, they tend to look for evidence to support their view that South Korea and

the United States must also be at fault to some significant degree. So, they ask, for example, if it isn't true that the United States doesn't like North Korea. And of course, they're right. For well over a decade, opinion polls have found that North Korea is one of the countries that Americans least like. And they might ask how North Korea could not but have felt vulnerable facing the great combined military might of the United States and South Korea. And of course Pyongyang does feel vulnerable. And even if North Korea did launch the war in 1950, all-out conflict has not recurred in the seven decades since. Why is it, they would ask, that the United States refuses North Korea's call for peace negotiations?

I sympathize with the notion that there tends to be two sides to the story in most disputes—but, again, certainly not all. I strongly believe that, while our side is not perfect, it is a fundamental mistake to regard North Korea as being anything approaching an innocent victim or to put much credence in its public justifications of its behavior.

Let me give you my own understanding of the fundamental situation and of North Korea's intentions. The roots of the issue lie in the division of the Korean Peninsula and Korean nation in 1945, which American officials proposed to prevent the Soviets from occupying the whole peninsula. Of course, we did not intend for the division to be permanent, much less to lead to the tragedies it did. But we did it, and so, like Colin Powell said of our invasion of Iraq, "You break it, you own it." I believe we bear some responsibility to try to fix the situation on the Korean Peninsula. And, in any event, we have powerful security interests to do so. To me, that means helping achieve the unification of a secure and democratic state, or at least a situation in which two Korean states have the kind of relationship enjoyed today by, say, Austria and Germany. We can't just walk away from our entire history with Korea, including the sacrifice of tens of thousands American lives, as Donald Trump blithely suggests.

The division lies at the basis of the current situation but it is not the reason for its continuation. The problem is that North Korea has a regime that is profoundly undemocratic and cannot maintain the support even of its own people without continuing its policy of their isolation, indoctrination, and intimidation. If both Koreas were democratic, unification or at least complete reconciliation would most likely have been achieved long ago. Why? Because unification would not have been a zero-sum game. Democratic politicians on both sides could have successfully bargained over power-sharing arrangements for a win-win outcome.

The leaders of North Korea themselves believe that they cannot remain in power over the long term unless they find a way eventually to undermine and take over the South. This is not an irrational conclusion on their part. They have every reason to be profoundly concerned. Remember, Kim Il Sung and Romanian leader Nicolai Ceausescu were great friends. Thus it was that a deeply shaken Kim Jong Il warned his officials in 1990 that what had happened the previous year to Ceausescu would happen to them, that is, the people of North Korea would rise up against them just like the Romanian people had executed Ceausescu, unless they redoubled their efforts to control the populace.

This overwhelming fear of their own people explains why North Korean leaders refuse, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, to allow the people of North and South Korea even to exchange letters and phone calls among relatives. Please think about that. How unspeakably cruel to have kept completely apart millions of parents and children, husbands and wives, brothers and sisters, for seven decades! And why did the North Korean regime insist on maintaining such control of the North Korean laborers who would work at the South Korean industrial park in Kaesong, choosing every employee and requiring that even bathroom visits never be made alone but at least in twos? Why does the North Korean regime not allow any, I repeat, *any* free media? *All* of its media are run by the government as propaganda organs.

It is important to understand that North Korean leaders look at the South with a mixture of fear and contempt. Fear, because, as I have noted, they know that if their own people ever begin to learn how much they have been lied to and how successful South Korea is, there will be no stopping it and they will rise up against them. Contempt, because Northern leaders do identify with their system and they regard theirs as the only legitimate Korean state. They demonize the South as a regime established by the American imperialists and staffed by Japanese collaborators and their descendants. On the other hand, their faith—yes, they themselves use the Korean word for “faith”—teaches them that Kim Il Sung was a victorious guerilla leader against the Japanese and then defeated the American imperialist invaders. They have long since forgotten that Kim’s guerilla efforts were small and achieved nothing, that he came to power in the North wearing a Soviet military uniform, and that it was Kim who persuaded the Soviets and the Chinese to support his disastrous and bloody plan to invade the South.

The result is this: North Korean leaders have always not only wanted to but felt they *must* unify the peninsula on their terms—by subversion if possible and by force, if necessary. Perhaps Kim Il Sung in 1950 was motivated in part by patriotism as well as by personal ambition, but he must also have been motivated by fear. Even in 1950, South Korea had twice the population of the North. Kim Il Sung was the leader of only a rump Korean state, and even then he knew he could not share power with the South. Thus, he invaded the South in 1950; he toyed with the possibility of another invasion in the mid-1960s; and he again sought China’s support for an invasion in 1975 as South Vietnam was falling to the communist North, but was rebuffed. Five years later, he effectively handed over the reins of government to his ruthless son Kim Jong Il. Following in the path of his father, who several times tried to assassinate South Korea’s president, including by sending commandoes to the Blue House in 1968, Kim Jong Il tried to kill South Korea’s president in a bomb blast in Burma in 1983. He missed the president but killed seventeen of his officials, including nine people of minister and vice minister rank. In 1987, concerned about the prestige that would accrue to South Korea by its hosting of the Summer Olympics in Seoul the following year, Kim Jong Il had agents plant explosives on a South Korean passenger airplane. The midair blast killed all 115 people on board. Kim Jong Il’s aim: to frighten the international community into not holding the Seoul Olympics. In the 1990s, as the North Korean people starved, Kim Jong Il focused on his nuclear weapons program. At the end of the 1990s, North Korea launched another military-diplomatic campaign against the South, this time, to try to do away with the Northern Limit Line protecting South Korean islands near the North Korean coast. Many North and South Korean sailors were killed in a number of naval

encounters that the North provoked, but the North Koreans made no progress. Frustrated, in 2010 the North Koreans launched a sneak torpedo attack on a South Korean naval vessel near the NLL, killing 46 young men as they slept. Some people expressed doubt that North Korea would do such a thing. Less than nine months later, the North Koreans launched another sneak attack, firing artillery at one of the South Korean islands populated by civilians, killing four people. This was done in broad daylight; the North Koreans didn't even bother to deny that one.

South Korea was of course not always a paragon of exemplary behavior over the past decades, but there is no comparing its record with the North's continuing, extreme violence against its neighbor. Sometimes critics will say: but isn't South Korea also aiming for unification on its terms. No, there is simply no comparison. South Koreans have refused even to consider paying a bit more in taxes to accumulate resources needed for unification. Most South Koreans want unification to be put off indefinitely because they are concerned that unification with the North as it has been distorted by the Kims' rule could prove to be an economic, social, and political disaster for the South and their own livelihoods.

Now this is a key point: Many, perhaps most, observers assume that North Korea gave up the mission of achieving unification two decades ago because it can't accept South Korea's terms and it doesn't have the means to achieve unification on its own terms. But that is a profound misunderstanding of the way North Korean leaders themselves see things. As I have explained, they have reasonable grounds to believe that not only their regime but their very lives depend on getting rid of South Korea, somehow, sooner or later. They know they can't get their way yet, but that doesn't mean they have given up, because, as they see it, they can't.

Over the past five decades, however, the North Koreans have become increasingly concerned that the trends on the peninsula and in the world are inimical to their interests. From the 1970s, South Korea's economy has far outpaced theirs. In the 1980s, South Korea democratized and its politics stabilized. In the 1990s, the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes collapsed, and China was focused on cooperating with the West for economic development. These were both profound changes that deprived the North of vital foreign aid and further damaged the economy. South Korea was allowed entry into the United Nations and has since been able to exercise its diplomatic influence throughout the world, even succeeding in having its foreign minister elected as the United Nations secretary general. The United States has firmly maintained its military alliance with South Korea, all the while expanding bilateral cooperation over a remarkable range of issues, from climate change, to anti-piracy patrols, to countering pandemic diseases.

Meanwhile, you, as a North Korean leader, must devote tremendous resources to controlling your own regime and populace, your economy has collapsed, your conventional military forces have hollowed out for lack of resources, and you have lost almost all of your international friends. How can you possibly get out of this disastrous situation?

Your answer: by engaging in a little wishful thinking.

You have been attracted to nuclear power and nuclear weapons since the 1950s if not the 1940s. The Soviet Union and the PRC have made it clear that they don't want you having nuclear weapons, but you don't like or trust either of them, and nuclear weapons would give you strategic heft against them. Nuclear weapons could be used to bolster the Kim family dynasty's prestige at home with the military and perhaps even with ordinary people. And, most importantly, you could use the threat of a nuclear attack to intimidate the United States into negotiations with you aimed at forcing it to remove sanctions against you and withdrawing U.S. forces from South Korea, effectively ending the U.S.-ROK alliance. Thereafter, you believe, the United States would become disinterested in the South as time passed. Eventually you could use threats, propaganda, and other manipulation to undermine the regime in the South and unify the peninsula on your terms.

For you, then, as a North Korean leader, the question is and always has been not "why nuclear weapons" but "why not nuclear weapons"?

Now, I did say "wishful thinking." This scenario is not going to work. It is delusional. The United States will not remove sanctions against North Korea and withdraw U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula until the peninsula has been denuclearized and the threat of North Korean invasion and subversion has ended. Even if the United States left the Korean Peninsula, today's South Korea is not the illegitimate, knock-over regime that North Korean leaders like to imagine it would be if only the Americans were gone.

But if you were a North Korean leader, with no alternative that didn't possibly involve the end of your regime and you yourself being put on trial by your own people, you would probably go with this strategy. You would argue, as North Korean officials have to Americans, that the United States might as well get used to North Korea having nuclear weapons because North Korea will never give them up. After all, they say, the United States has accepted India and Pakistan having nuclear weapons, hasn't it? Why not also North Korea? You would feel encouraged whenever Westerners repeated your propaganda that sanctions have no effect on you except to spur you to accelerate your nuclear weapons program. You also know that South Koreans are deeply divided about North Korea policy, that the main opposition party still supports Kim Dae-jung's and Roh Moo-hyun's sunshine policy, and that that opposition could regain the Blue House as early as February 2018. And you know that PRC leaders fear your loss of power and the resulting chaos and unpredictable risks to their interests more than they oppose your development of nuclear weapons.

So you continue to develop nuclear weapons and the missiles to deliver them as quickly as your resources and skills permit. Confident that no outside power is going to attack your facilities, you even exaggerate your level of nuclear and missile development. Because your aim is to get your way by intimidation, you have no reason to hide your capabilities. Indeed, you even lie about having non-existent capabilities, such as the hydrogen bomb. You are not doing this, as far too many observers and sometimes even U.S. officials have said, because you are a spoiled child wanting attention. On the contrary, you are a serious, calculating, ruthless, and desperate grown-up with a plan.

Now, critics of American policy are wont to say that North Korean leaders saw the Americans in action in Iraq and Libya and decided then that they had no choice but to have nuclear weapons. Many critics also believe that there was an opportunity up until about a decade ago, had the United States been more forthcoming, to prevent Pyongyang from becoming a full-fledged nuclear power.

While I agree that the North Koreans' determination to develop nuclear weapons may well have been bolstered by what the United States did in Iraq and Libya, my own opinion is that the North Korean leaders were determined, long before those cases, to develop nuclear weapons. We don't have inside information about the strategic thinking of North Korean leaders and thus can't know if they ever seriously considered not developing nuclear weapons. But my own working hypothesis, which I will hold until there is more evidence to the contrary, is that North Korean leaders probably decided at least four decades ago to build nuclear weapons and that they never seriously considered giving them up completely. That is indicated in part by the fact that, three times, our side did reach nuclear agreements with the North Koreans—the North-South agreement of 1991-1992, the Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea in 1994, and the Six Party Talks agreements. In all cases, the North failed to implement or cheated on these agreements.

That is, I believe, is the tragic—and dangerous—reality on the Korean Peninsula today.

### **The Obama Administration's Policy**

Now let me turn to the Obama administration's policy.

During the presidential campaign of 2008, Barack Obama famously indicated he was willing to talk with just about any leader, including Kim Jong Il, to shake hands with those willing to unclench their fists against the United States. He received a great deal of criticism for that statement, including from some of his own advisers, and many believed that it was foolish for him to volunteer something so controversial during a close campaign. But it is clear he said it because he believed in it.

Almost immediately after he was inaugurated, President Obama sent public and private messages to the North Korean leadership, including through Secretary of State Clinton, that he was sincere in his desire for negotiations. In doing so, he cautioned that further nuclear and missile tests would undermine the basis for talks. North Korea responded two months later by launching a rocket into space. And when the United Nations condemned that, North Korea promptly conducted its second test of a nuclear device.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration remained in contact with North Korean diplomats at the United Nations, the so-called New York Channel. As his point man on North Korea, President Obama appointed Stephen Bosworth. Ambassador Bosworth, who, sadly, passed away last year, was a committed engager of North Korea. He had headed the U.S.-led

international organization building light water nuclear reactors in North Korea under the U.S.-North Korea Agreed Framework of 1994. He was one of our most senior diplomats and well and favorably known to the North Koreans.

Yet during Ambassador Bosworth's visits to Pyongyang as the United States Special Representative for North Korea Policy, he was treated as a mere functionary. If North Korean leaders had been serious about improving relations with the United States, they would have received him at the highest levels. After all, there was no rule that Kim Jong Il could not receive Ambassador Bosworth, who was authorized to report directly to the president as well as to the secretary of state. President Clinton received North Korean Marshal Jo Myong Rok in the White House in the year 2000.

Despite the North Korean nuclear and missile tests of 2009, Ambassador Bosworth held talks that laid the groundwork for a new agreement with North Korea, which his successor soon concluded with the North Koreans, the so-called Leap Day Deal of 2012. North Korea "agreed to implement a moratorium on long-range missile launches, nuclear tests and nuclear activities at Yongbyon, including uranium enrichment activities." In exchange, the United States agreed to ship 12,000 metric tons of food aid each month to North Korea over an entire year.

Everyone knew it was a partial deal—by that time we were confident that North Korea also had nuclear facilities outside of Yongbyon, thanks to our own Dr. Hecker's visit to Yongbyon the previous year and his subsequent analysis—but the Obama administration wanted to see if a process of confidence-building measures could be started. Having been burned by the North Korean nuclear test in 2009, the Obama administration intentionally spread out the food aid shipments. And it chose food shipments to induce the North Koreans to agree to a partial freeze because, as humanitarian aid, it was the only "payment" to Pyongyang that was any longer politically acceptable in Washington.

The Obama administration thus went out on a limb in a presidential election year. And just six weeks later, North Korea conducted another space launch forbidden by UN Security Council resolution. You can imagine how betrayed and embarrassed the U.S. negotiators were, as hordes of critics of engagement said, "We told you so." To add insult to injury, the North Koreans then declared that they had told the American negotiators that they did not consider space launches to be subject to the freeze, despite the fact that they certainly led American negotiators to believe that they would not conduct such launches during the freeze.

The Obama administration had negotiated such a deal with North Korea even though its senior officials had said earlier that the United States was "tired of buying the same horse twice." The failure of the Leap Day Deal only increased the skepticism within the Obama administration that had led some of its officials to characterize the administration's policy as one of "strategic patience." In other words, the United States would no longer fall for North Korea's tricks and manipulation. It would make clear that the United States remained willing to hold authentic negotiations about ending North Korea's nuclear weapons program, completely and verifiably, and was prepared, as had been the Clinton administration and the George W. Bush's



administration, at least in its second term, to establish diplomatic relations, remove sanctions, and provide aid to Pyongyang in exchange. But the ball was in North Korea's court to show that it would genuinely enter negotiations with that aim. In the meantime, the United States would work with the international community, especially China, to increase sanctions pressure on North Korea to make its leaders understand that it could not both develop its economy and continue to pursue nuclear weapons.

The U.S. policy reflects the fact that, in making and implementing North Korea policy, there are a number of real-world parameters within which U.S. officials must work.

First, the United States has made a tremendous investment in its commitment to the Republic of Korea, and South Korea has repaid that effort by making itself one of most successful development cases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. American officials often publicly cite South Korea as one of the greatest successes of American foreign and security policy. In dealing with North Korea, American officials know that, when it comes to a choice, its interests in South Korea are immeasurably greater than its interests in North Korea.

Second, ever since President Truman fired General MacArthur in April 1951, the last thing that American policymakers have wanted on the Korean Peninsula is another war. Thus, North Korea has gotten away with numerous acts of war against the United States and South Korea, yet has not suffered military retaliation. This is why the United States never attacked North Korea's budding nuclear and missile programs.

Third, the United States has a profound interest in nuclear nonproliferation. It has been one of the great tenets of American policy since 1945. And most South Koreans would regard U.S. acceptance of North Korea's nuclear weapons program as a fundamental American betrayal of their interests, particularly as the United States made it clear in the 1970s that South Korea could have the alliance or nuclear weapons, but not both. Because North Korea not having nuclear weapons is so important to the United States, Washington has been, and remains, willing negotiate with North Korea and normalize relations and aid it economically if it will completely and verifiably give up nuclear weapons. But by the same token, the United States is driven to increase sanctions against North Korea until it is willing to engage in authentic negotiations about denuclearization.

Fourth, American policymakers know that North Korea relies for external support almost entirely on the PRC. They know that PRC leaders don't like the Pyongyang regime, don't want it to have nuclear weapons, and are seriously concerned that its disastrous rule could eventually lead to regime collapse, with unpredictable risks for China. But American policymakers also know that Chinese leaders are extremely suspicious of the United States and have not been willing to apply enough pressure on North Korea to induce it to negotiate seriously about denuclearization—because the Chinese feel that the only amount of pressure that could do that might also lead to the regime's collapse. Nevertheless, because of China's potential influence on the situation, American policymakers have felt that they have no choice but to try to work with China on the North Korea problem. Rather than fruitlessly and even counterproductively

press the Chinese to go farther than they are willing to go at any one time, the Obama administration has waited for North Korean provocations to galvanize the PRC leadership to work with us on the problem. With each provocation, the Obama administration has marshalled Chinese and international support to gradually ratchet up sanctions and diplomatic pressure on Pyongyang.

These, then, are some of the main parameters within which the Obama administration has had to develop and implement North Korea policy.

### **The Critics' Arguments and Proposals**

Next, let's turn to the criticism of the Obama administration's policy.

Critics of the Obama administration's North Korea policy charge flatly that it has been a "failure." They say that "strategic patience" means "doing nothing" and that the administration has not prioritized the North Korea problem. They say that the administration does not seem to understand how quickly the North Korean nuclear program is developing and how threatening and dangerous it can become. They argue that "time is not on our side" and that we must deal with North Korea "as it is" rather than wait for it to collapse, as some claim the United States is doing. They assert that the Obama administration's position is that it will not negotiate with North Korea unless it first gives up its nuclear weapons program, and that, out of incompetence or malevolence, it has refused to respond to important North Korean proposals, such as for negotiations to replace the current armistice agreement with a peace treaty. They say that the Obama administration is foolishly and fecklessly "outsourcing" its North Korea policy to Beijing and that sanctions are counterproductive.

Let me briefly address each of these criticisms. You can then judge for yourself if the Obama administration policy has been a "failure."

Not very long after it introduced the term "strategic patience," the Obama administration dropped it, because critics immediately said that it meant "doing nothing." In fact, the Obama administration, from President Obama on down, has devoted enormous time, attention, and resources to the North Korea problem. The United States has strengthened counterproliferation measures against North Korea; it has taken numerous military measures to bolster the deterrence of North Korea and the defense of the South, including missile defense; it has led the United Nations to repeatedly ratchet up sanctions in response to North Korean provocations; and it has been a leader in making North Korea's human rights situation a focus of the international community. The charge that the Obama administration has done "nothing" is demonstrably false. Critics who say this are not really criticizing the degree of Obama administration activity; they are criticizing its content. Basically, critics on the left want the administration to do things such as negotiate unconditionally with North Korea; those on the right want the administration to apply much greater pressure, much faster.

Related to the charge that the administration has not prioritized the North Korea problem, some critics suggest that the administration does not seem to understand how quickly the North Korean nuclear program is proceeding and what the implications are. I can assure you that the enormous U.S. intelligence, military, and diplomatic establishments are not keeping the pace, scale, and threat of the development of North Korea's nuclear and missile programs from President Obama, and I can also assure you that he is plenty smart enough to grasp what they say. It is perfectly clear that North Korea having nuclear weapons is a very bad thing, and that North Korea is pushing ahead as quickly as it can. The administration is well aware that North Korea having a credible ability to attack the American homeland will be another, even more dangerous stage, as will be North Korea's deployment of nuclear weapons-equipped submarines in the seas and of tactical nuclear weapons across the DMZ from Seoul. The issue is not, primarily, the exact extent and pace of North Korea's programs, it is how to respond to them.

But, the critics continue, this nevertheless shows that "time is not on our side" and that we must deal with North Korea "as it is" rather than wait for it to collapse. Now, the phrase "time is not on our side" is meaningless until defined. Most critics would say it means that North Korea is continuing along a path very dangerous to our side, that our current policy is not working, and that we must therefore do something else. While everyone would agree that the situation is getting worse and that we have not achieved the goal of denuclearization yet, the rest is arguable. Perhaps we are in fact making progress toward changing the minds of North Korean leaders. If so, changing our course now could make the situation worse. One could argue that "time is not on our side" applies rather to the North Koreans. Where is the evidence that they will ever achieve their goal of being accepted as a legitimate nuclear weapons state and thus get into a position to bolster their standing relative to South Korea, much less take it over?

As for dealing with North Korea "as it is," this long ago lost all meaning. When our own Dr. Perry used the term in connection with the North Korea policy review he conducted for the Clinton administration in 1998-1999, it was a wise admonition against wishful thinking, specifically, not to expect a North Korean regime collapse or regime change in time to stop North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. And a military attack on the North's nuclear facilities would have been too risky to our South Korean ally. The conclusion was that we had to hold our noses and negotiate with Pyongyang to make sure it didn't complete its development of nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, we're now long past that.

Well, the critics would respond, isn't the United States still hoping for if not expecting a North Korean collapse? Didn't President Obama himself this year say that regimes like North Korea eventually collapse? Yes, he did. But he didn't suggest he believes that regime change in North Korea will come in time to deal with the nuclear problem and he didn't suggest that his belief that the regime will eventually change is the basis for his North Korea policy. In fact, I'm confident that it isn't. North Korea's nuclear program hasn't ended yet, but that's not because President Obama assumes that the problem will go away of its own accord. It's because North Korea is so determined to hold on to it.

Well, why won't the Obama administration just negotiate with North Korea? What is there to lose in talking? Why not, for example, explore North Korea's proposal for peace talks? What could it hurt? Such questions are part of the charge that the Obama administration is unwilling to deal with North Korea. This is also demonstrably false. As I noted, from the outset the Obama administration was willing to negotiate with Pyongyang, just as it has negotiated with Myanmar, Iran, and Cuba. In fact, the administration has had talks and negotiations with North Korea. And it is certainly not true as pundits and journalists write, far too often, that the administration refuses to negotiate with North Korea until it agrees to give up nuclear weapons. The administration has been clear that it will negotiate with North Korea when it demonstrates credibly that it is actually willing to negotiate about denuclearization. Given the record of the Obama administration with other adversaries, isn't the likeliest explanation for the lack of talks now that it is North Korea and not the Obama administration which is not willing to negotiate on reasonable terms?

Here is the nub of the issue. Actually, neither the United States nor North Korea has been unwilling to negotiate with the other for the past 25 years. The issue has always been rather, on what terms. In recent years, North Korea has stated repeatedly, both publicly and privately, that it is not willing to negotiate denuclearization except in the context of global denuclearization. In other words, not in our lifetimes. It has said only that it is willing to sit down with the United States to negotiate "mutual arms reduction." That is code for the United States treating North Korea as a nuclear equal and negotiating the withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Korean Peninsula. The same can be said of North Korea's proposal for bilateral peace talks with the United States. Talk about buying the same horse twice! The United States and South Korea initiated Four Party Talks with North Korea and China in 1996 precisely to replace the Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty. For two years we urged the North Koreans to discuss the tension-reduction and confidence-building measures and other mechanisms required to make a peace treaty worth more than the paper it was printed on. But the North Koreans made clear that all they wanted was that sheet of paper. They refused all discussion of its content. We had a similar experience when a peace treaty working group discussed the same issue on the margins of the Six Party Talks. The North Koreans are not stupid. They know we're not so forgetful or so foolish as to buy that horse a third time, especially under the present conditions. They made the proposal for propaganda purposes. And, in the extremely unlikely event that we had agreed to it, they would have had a field day making propaganda at the talks, with no intention to work for a lasting peace mechanism as you or I might imagine one.

But why not just try anyway, how could it be worse than it is now, some critics might reiterate. Well, actually, it could very well make things worse. If the U.S. government entered negotiations with North Korea almost certain to fail immediately and spectacularly, it would not only embarrass the United States with its friends and allies and open up the president to withering criticism from the opposition at home for naiveté and fecklessness. More importantly, it would serve to underline in North Korean leaders' minds that, if they only hang tough, eventually the United States will accept them as a legitimate nuclear weapons state.

Critics will repeat that the Obama administration's policy rests on sanctions and China's help in making them work, and that these have failed and there is no prospect of their succeeding. It is certainly true that, so far, sanctions have not resulted in North Korea changing course. U.S. officials acknowledge that, and some have indicated they understand that it may take a considerable time for sanctions to have the desired effect, i.e., to make North Korean leaders understand that having nuclear weapons costs them more and gains them less than not having them. But North Korea has never been more economically sanctioned or diplomatically isolated than it is now, and the Obama administration has openly stated that it intends to use each succeeding North Korean provocation to mobilize the international community to support even tougher sanctions.

But, the critic interjects, rather than changing their minds, North Korean leaders just feel more determined when U.S. hostility manifests itself in more international sanctions against their regime. I'm sorry, but here I give the North Korean leaders more credit for being fellow human beings and for being intelligent than the critics do. I have no doubt that North Korean leaders resent sanctions and that their first instinct is to lash out, rhetorically if not "kinetically." But their angry words are also propaganda, intended to reduce the likelihood of the international community imposing further sanctions, precisely because they do hurt North Korea and profoundly concern the leadership. If you doubt that, please re-read Kim Jong Un's bill of particulars regarding the execution of his uncle Jang Song Thaek. There the North Korean leadership makes it clear that sanctions are very powerful indeed.

Well, but, the critic continues, isn't North Korea growing economically, thus demonstrating that sanctions are futile? Yes, it has been growing since the recovery from the famine of the 1990 but the growth rate is slow and from an extremely low base. If it were growing very much, would UN humanitarian agencies have recently reported that over 70% of the the entire population remains "food insecure"? The UN has pleaded again for international funding to feed the North Korean people, this time asking for \$111 million. (Meanwhile, one estimate of the cost of Kim Jong Un's coronation at the just concluded Seventh Workers Party Congress was \$200 million.) Moreover, much of the marginally increased economic resources available to the regime due to marketization from below are being wasted not only on the nuclear and missile programs but also on incredibly lavish luxury projects such as dolphinariums for the elite in the capital, not to mention the constant mass demonstrations of loyalty to Kim Jong Un. In any event, North Korea's economy must be looked at not in isolation but relative to South Korea, which Pyongyang regards as its greatest long-term threat. Even with the slight growth in the North today, South Korea's economy usually grows marginally each year more than the entire size of the North Korean economy! Over the long run, that is a strategic disaster for Pyongyang.

Finally, frustrated by my obtuseness, the critic declares: But this all rests on China and you know China is never going to put enough pressure on North Korea to change its leaders' minds.

Well, as I said, I know and I'm confident that the Obama administration also knows Chinese attitudes. But the Obama administration, or perhaps rather North Korea's actions, have

brought the Chinese further along than most would have thought just a couple of years ago. The most recent UN resolution, despite many loopholes, is very powerful stuff, and there will be more to come. Meanwhile, at North Korea's party congress this past week, the first in 36 years, there were no foreign guests. What a great contrast to the international affair that the last one, under Kim Il Sung, was in 1980! This time, China only sent a letter congratulating Kim on his new title of party chairman. Meanwhile, President Xi Jinping has never met Kim Jong Un, despite meeting President Park Geun-hye many times.

Will the Chinese intentionally apply pressure that they think may bring down the regime? Probably not. But the Obama administration is not asking Beijing to do that. Again, the Obama administration wants only to induce the North Korean leadership to understand that nuclear weapons cost more than they're worth. As the State Department's Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Danny Russel, said during a recent lecture here at Shorenstein APARC:

"... we're not trying to kill the patient. We are not out to bring North Korea's leaders to their knees. We are trying to bring them to their senses."

How much pressure and how long will it take to begin to make North Korean leaders understand that their strategic thinking has in fact been willful? Probably a lot. But the clearer and the more consistent our message is, the sooner it will happen. To believe otherwise comes close to assuming that the North Korean regime and its leaders are somehow unique in human history.

As far as the critics' own policy proposals, I can be brief. There are basically only two from, for want of a better word, the left, and one from the right.

From the left, the first proposal, which I've already discussed, is for the United States to negotiate unconditionally with North Korea. As I've noted, this actually means that the United States would be negotiating on North Korea's terms and bypassing our South Korean ally.

The left's second proposal is that the United States focus on getting North Korea to agree to a freeze on its nuclear and missile programs, to prevent a bad situation from getting worse. Now, a freeze itself would be good. But the United States tried this in the Leap Day Deal and it failed spectacularly. The problems today are how to achieve a real freeze *and* how to ensure that it does not imply acceptance of North Korea as a limited nuclear weapons state. For example, how much and what would the United States have to give the North Koreans for such a freeze? How could we verify that they are not continuing with nuclear and missile development after they receive "payment"? How could we be confident that they would not do as they did after the Leap Day Deal and break the agreement almost immediately? And, most importantly, at the time of making such a deal, what basis would we have to believe that this was a stepping stone on the way to complete denuclearization? If we didn't have such a basis, the deal would be regarded universally, including by our South Korean and Japanese allies, as indicating *de facto* American acquiescence in North Korea being a limited nuclear weapons state. That would be

disastrous. Until questions such as these can be credibly answered, a freeze is more of an aspiration than a potential policy.

Meanwhile, on the right, the main proposal is to use every possible means of pressing the North harder and faster. I've tried to explain some of the obstacles to the Obama administration or any U.S. administration going a whole lot faster than it already is. Basically, we have to take into account the willingness of allies and partners to assist us, and also let the North Koreans unintentionally help us bring our allies and partners along.

### **Looking Ahead**

Let me close by briefly attempting to assess how the strategic situation on the Korean Peninsula may evolve and how the next U.S. administration is likely to approach it.

First, I assume that North Korea will continue full steam ahead with its nuclear and missile programs—until it doesn't. If I had to guess, I would guess it will be at least a number of years before we see signs that strategic thinking in Pyongyang might be changing for the better. But if we hold firm and if Kim Jong Un matures and feels more secure internally, change on his part is possible. If Kim doesn't eventually change, those around him may one day choose another leader as external pressures on them increase.

Second, in the meantime, the nuclear threat will worsen. North Korea will not only claim but actually demonstrate progress in a variety of technologies. With North Korea having a young new leader as well as possibly possessing deliverable nuclear weapons for the first time, its rhetorical threats may become even more extreme. North Korean leaders will become increasingly frustrated as their nuclear threats fail to change our policy. North Korea may take greater risks militarily, which could lead to accidents, retaliation, and escalation. The deployment of tactical nuclear weapons in the North would be particularly dangerous.

Third, frankly, I'm concerned that too many people in the "progressive" camp in South Korea continue to underestimate Pyongyang, that is, assume that its ultimate aim is security from a hostile world rather than what it really is: achieving security by inducing the end of the U.S.-ROK alliance and eventually undermining and taking over the South. South Korea will have its next presidential election in December of next year. At least three major candidates are likely to run, increasing the odds that a progressive candidate could win and then try to implement an updated version of the sunshine policy. If that happens, we will suffer five lost years in which the leaders in Pyongyang will feel they have no reason to reconsider their current approach.

How then will the next U.S. administration deal with this complex and dangerous situation?

As I mentioned, I believe that the next president will conduct a policy review at the outset of her administration. Hillary Clinton was centrally involved in the making of the Obama administration's North Korea policy, so she is already well informed and has her own views, which, as far as I know, are reasonably similar to those of President Obama. In general, she is

widely regarded as being more inclined to the use of military force in international affairs than President Obama has been, but I have no reason to believe that she would be any less cautious than him about risking another conflict on the Korean Peninsula.

Unlike President Obama, however, during President Clinton's tenure, North Korea may demonstrate a capability to hit the United States with nuclear weapons. How to prevent or react to that will be one of the central questions that her policy review addresses. As you may have guessed from my remarks today, I myself believe it very unlikely that the North would actually launch its nuclear weapons against anyone, but other Americans may find that hard to believe, especially since North Korea even today proclaims its readiness to strike and destroy the American homeland with nuclear weapons.

Since 1950, the United States' first priority on the Korean Peninsula has been to protect the Republic of Korea, which has been largely consistent with the United States' second priority there, preventing another war on the Korean Peninsula. Denuclearization has been only the United States' third priority on the peninsula in recent decades since the issue arose. What will an American president do if she begins to feel that the trade-off is becoming not that between protecting South Korea and achieving North Korea's denuclearization, but between protecting our South Korean ally and protecting the American homeland itself?

### **Conclusion**

This is a pretty worrisome situation, and I wouldn't want to end on that note. Actually, I remain cautiously optimistic that wise leadership in the United States and South Korea and close cooperation with China and the rest of the international community will eventually defuse the North Korea problem. North Korea cannot and will not continue forever to behave as it does now. Already there are great tensions within the North Korean leadership, as indicated by the fate of Jang Song Thaek and the execution and purges of scores of other senior leaders. The IT revolution is gradually penetrating the country. This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the way North Korea operates is completely anachronistic. Our task is to help bring about a good outcome as quickly and as peacefully as possible. It can be done, and I believe it will. But to accomplish that, actually, we do have to remain "patient" while continuing to work very hard to implement our current strategy, because it is the best strategy available to us to achieve American ends on the Korean Peninsula.

Thank you. I look forward to your questions and comments.

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