



## PERSPECTIVES

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# The Korean Peninsula Is Waiting for Trump

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The North Korean nuclear and missile crisis is posing a challenge to the new US administration, especially in the wake of the recent American missile strike in Syria. President Trump will need to consider not only the current North Korean crisis and the immediate military or diplomatic options available for confronting it, but also his long-term goals in the region. Diplomatic, economic, and military options will all have consequences.

According to South Korean intelligence sources, Pyongyang is preparing for its sixth nuclear test and holding short- and middle-range missile launches (all failures so far) to test technologies and convey a message to Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo. Pyongyang is also getting ready to launch a Taepodong-2 Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM), a weapon that can threaten the American west coast.

The Asian region is waiting with great interest to see what President Donald Trump's Asia policy will be, particularly with regard to North Korea. Will he be better able to constrain Kim Jong-un than was President Obama? If Trump chooses an "Anything But Obama" (ABO) policy, what does that mean? South Korea, Japan, and even China are waiting for the administration's "Asian team". As of this writing, President Trump has not nominated many officials to the Department of Defense or the State Department to deal with Asia, and he has not yet selected an ambassador to Korea.

The president did send US Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Asia, both of whom reemphasized the importance of the alliance between the US and its Asian allies. Tillerson even hinted at a new US

Asia policy by suggesting that unlike its predecessor, the Trump administration will not maintain a policy of strategic patience.

What are Washington's policy options with regard to the North Korean nuclear and missile issue, and what can be achieved?

**The military option:** Secretary Tillerson visited Seoul in March 2017. During his visit, he stated that the military option was on the table and that Washington might consider a preemptive strike if an imminent threat arose from Pyongyang. The military option was discussed as far back as the 1990s, when a surgical military attack against Yongbyon was considered but not executed.

A preemptive strike against North Korea's nuclear sites is not feasible because of practical concerns about potential radiation damage. But it would be problematic regardless, because a military strike against Pyongyang's missile sites would have to take into account North Korean retaliation. That could include missiles launched at US bases in Korea, Japan, or Guam, or an artillery bombardment of Seoul from the DMZ.

To prevent such retaliation, Washington would need to use enough airpower to destroy Pyongyang's sites very quickly. This can be done, but the number of casualties and degree of economic cost for South Korea and even Japan could be very high. This option might achieve the goal of halting the North Korean military threat, but the cost could be enormous.

**The bilateral vs. the multilateral:** Secretary Tillerson said during his visit to Korea that Washington was considering harsher sanctions on Pyongyang. Sanctions can be increased multilaterally through the UNSC or bilaterally by the US and its allies.

In order to pass a resolution at the UNSC, Washington would need to convince Beijing not to veto it. Beijing has hinted several times that it will not support new UNSC resolutions intensifying sanctions against North Korea, insisting that only negotiations will resolve the conflict. One should remember that China and Russia have not always implemented all UNSC sanctions against Pyongyang.

Because of this impediment, Washington and its allies should consider implementing direct sanctions on North Korea. A US sanctioning of North Korean bank accounts, a measure it took in Macau, could be very effective – although after Macau, Pyongyang took the precaution of moving its accounts to banks less inclined to follow American instructions.

If the goal is to convince Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons program, sanctions will not be effective. However, they might suffice to constrain North Korea – provided China does not offer it a bailout.

**Reviving the Six Party Talks (6PT):** The idea of reviving the 6PT is raised every time other means of constraining Pyongyang fail. The 6PT were not able to halt the North Korean nuclear program several years ago. Even if the talks resume, Pyongyang will not negotiate freezing or halting its nuclear program. Officials in the Obama administration had suggested the compromise measure of limiting the number of tests Pyongyang would be allowed to conduct. This would be very difficult to verify and enforce, even if agreed to by Pyongyang.

The 6PT might serve as a confidence mechanism for the six members, but it will not achieve the goal of freezing the North Korean nuclear threat.

**Appeasement and a change from within:** The Trump administration will not support any policy that might be seen as appeasing North Korea. In the past, South Korean president Kim Dae-jung pursued the so-called Sunshine policy, which tried to convince Pyongyang that it was in its economic interest to change. This policy failed.

South Korea is in a transitional period until the new presidential elections on May 9, 2017. The leading candidate supports a more positive policy towards North Korea and China. Another layer can be added to this policy: improving relations with Pyongyang while promoting regime change from within. This would, of course, be an incremental process. It might achieve the goal of decreasing the North Korean military threat, but it would take a long time.

**Intercepting shipments:** North Korea poses a threat not just to the Korean Peninsula but to other regions as well through its exports of missile and nuclear technology (to Syria, for example). Intercepting military exports from North Korea would increase economic pressure on Pyongyang.

A serious concern is that North Korea will develop a nuclear bomb for Iran. This would allow Tehran to achieve its nuclear goal without breaching the P5+1 agreement, and would be a financial boon for Pyongyang. Intercepting shipments might increase the pressure on North Korea and close Iran's nuclear "back door", but again, it will not convince Pyongyang to give up its nuclear program.

The April 7, 2017 US missile strike in Syria sent a signal, not only to President Assad but to Pyongyang as well that Washington is drawing a line. During the Gulf War, Kim Jong-il disappeared because he was afraid Washington

might target him. Kim Jong-un will get the message, but he will try to challenge the new rules of the game. Even if the Syrian strike does signal a change in US policy, it will not be sufficient to convince Kim Jong-un to give up his nuclear weapons.

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