



## **Handling the North Korean Nuclear Challenge**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The recent verbal exchanges between President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un have been among the most belligerent and bellicose to pass between any two major leaders in recent history. The North Korean nuclear crisis now resembles the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis between the US and the Soviet Union. Trump has several options with which to deal with Kim. All are problematic, and a few are truly dangerous.

Kim Jong-un is rapidly developing and testing ballistic missiles and nuclear bombs and is threatening the US and its Asian allies. President Donald Trump wants to halt Pyongyang's race to become a nuclear power and has threatened Kim in turn. Both have said they will annihilate one another's countries, and each describes the other as a lunatic.

Kim has declared that he will test a hydrogen bomb in the Pacific, and Trump signaled that he is ready to use force by dispatching B1 heavy bombers close to the eastern border of North Korea. Kim responded by threatening to shoot down US combat planes even outside its airspace.

President Trump has several options with which to deal with this crisis. They range on a spectrum from doing nothing, which would allow North Korea to become a nuclear power, through diplomacy and sanctions to the use of force and cyber-attacks.

### **Option 1: Let North Korea become a nuclear power**

North Korea is not yet a nuclear power. To become one, it will have to acquire and prove a capacity to produce intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking any location in the US, as well as nuclear warheads that can be

mounted on them. Several experts, mostly former officials in the Obama administration, argue that it is too late to stop Pyongyang, and the US should simply permit it to go nuclear. This option, they claim, will create a nuclear stalemate – a "delicate balance of terror."

This would amount to a mutual deterrence system of the kind that existed between the US and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. A nuclear North Korea could also, in theory, turn Kim into a moderate leader.

The problem with this approach is that its proponents ignore the horrible regime in Pyongyang. They assume leadership rationality, and overlook the almost certain result of nuclear proliferation both in Asia (South Korea and Japan) and the Middle East (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Turkey).

### **Option 2: An Iranian-style nuclear agreement**

Other experts have suggested that the crisis can be solved via diplomacy, negotiation, and an agreement similar to the one signed with Iran. This would be an improved version, lasting 10 to 15 years, in which Kim would roll back or suspend his nuclear weapons program under strict UN monitoring and verification. In return, sanctions would be lifted and Pyongyang would receive substantial aid.

This idea ignores Kim's clear determination to acquire nuclear weapons at any cost, as well as Pyongyang's violation of earlier nuclear agreements. It also disregards the great deficiencies of the Iran model. Trump, who heavily criticized the Iran deal, is unlikely to endorse a similar one for North Korea.

### **Option 3: The 1962 Cuban Missile Agreement model**

Another diplomatic solution could be the model that ended the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviet Union explained that its deployment of nuclear missiles in Cuba had been intended primarily to deter the US from its efforts to topple Fidel Castro. The crisis ended, and the missiles were shipped back to Russia, when the US promised to desist in its campaign against Castro.

If Kim's main concern is his own survival, he could theoretically be persuaded to halt his nuclear program in exchange for a US commitment to refrain from toppling him. However, the high level of mutual suspicion between the two leaders would make this solution extremely hard to achieve.

### **Option 4: Sanctions**

The UN Security Council recently imposed new trade and energy sanctions on Pyongyang in a resolution supported by China and Russia. Beijing is a critical actor here, as China is Pyongyang's main trading partner and a major supplier of oil and gas.

The reality is that North Korea has ignored international sanctions for years. It is an isolated state, and Kim couldn't care less about the additional hardship his people will suffer. In any case, Iran will be more than happy to replenish North Korea's oil and gas depots.

#### **Option 5: The use of force**

The US has a number of military options, including the targeted killing of Kim and his senior officials, the destruction of command and control centers, and surgical missile and air bombing of all nuclear facilities as well as the artillery deployed near the South Korean border. Such attacks are highly risky because they require accurate intelligence which the US may not have. Also, even after such attacks, Pyongyang might still have enough remaining military capability to inflict huge damage on Seoul, a capital of 10 million people located just 35 miles from the border.

The US would not be able to use massive force without prior consultation and coordination with South Korea and Japan, the two allies most likely to suffer from North Korean retaliatory attacks.

The diplomacy of force could be used by deploying significant forces in and around South Korea, including tactical nuclear weapons. China would certainly resent any major deployment of American forces and consequently might increase its diplomatic pressure on Kim.

#### **Option 6: Cyber-attack**

Cyber-attacks could neutralize Pyongyang's command and control system as well as its nuclear and most other conventional weapons, and could also disrupt vital civilian infrastructure such as power stations. Several countries are developing massive cyber-attack capabilities, but they have not yet been tested in real time. Furthermore, North Korea has developed defensive and offensive cyber capabilities of its own that could render this option ineffective.

#### **Between Pyongyang and Teheran**

All these options are problematic and risky. Trump could employ a combination of them at any given time. Success or failure will have serious ramifications for nuclear proliferation and world peace.

The battle against the North Korean nuclear and missile program is critical for Israel because of the close relations between Pyongyang and Teheran. Failure to stop North Korea will almost certainly lead to a failure to stop Iran. In the past, Pyongyang has transferred nuclear and missile technology to Iran, resulting in similar missiles appearing in military parades in both capitals. Iran is now much more developed in science and technology and is likely to improve North Korean systems.

Furthermore, Iran can keep within all the restrictions imposed on it by the nuclear deal and still develop and test its nuclear weapon and missile program in North Korea.

Trump's policy on the Iran nuclear deal has not been consistent. He called it the worst deal the US has ever made and vowed to cancel it, but later, his administration shifted its language to corrections and modifications.

Recently, the focus has moved to stronger enforcement by the relevant UN agencies. If North Korea becomes a remote platform for Iranian research, development, and testing, enforcing will become irrelevant. In any event, should a similar situation develop in Iran, lessons from the successful or failed options to stop Pyongyang might help the US and Israel cope more effectively with the challenge.

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