For decades, North Korea has been vigorously pursuing status as a nuclear weapons state. The pace of its progress has dramatically increased in the last twenty years: since the early 2000s, North Korea has conducted six nuclear tests and 100 missile tests.\(^1\) Its most recent nuclear and missile tests are particularly troubling. The nuclear test conducted on September 3 had an explosive yield on the order of hundreds of kilotons, indicating that the tested device was likely a thermonuclear weapon (as North Korean statements claimed) or a boosted fission weapon.\(^2\) Further, the Hwasong-14 missile design tested on July 4 and July 28 is believed to be an intercontinental ballistic missile with the ability to potentially strike the continental United States.\(^3\) Taken together, these recent advances suggest that a North Korean nuclear-armed ICBM might already be possible, or will be possible within a short timeframe.

North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons has been opposed by much of the international community. The proliferation of nuclear weapons to any new state increases the global risks of deterrence failure or accidental nuclear weapon use, but such risks are perceived as being particularly great for a “rogue state” like North Korea. The idea of an irrational, paranoid state with a highly defensive worldview possessing the destructive power of nuclear weapons has long been a major concern for world leaders. There have been several efforts to reverse, stop, or slow North Korean progress towards acquiring nuclear weapons, but most approaches have failed to demonstrably delay nuclear advances. In particular, international sanctions against North Korea appear to be ineffective in preventing further nuclear development and testing, a point that North Korean officials emphasized after the September 3 nuclear test by claiming that “all components of the H-bomb were homemade” and that North Korea could produce more thermonuclear bombs at will.\(^4\) Such a statement signals that external pressure in the form of sanctions will not stop North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.

Historically, the United States has sought to freeze and ultimately reverse North Korean progress towards developing nuclear weapons. Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula has been a stated goal of the U.S. and South Korea since Pyongyang first demonstrated its nuclear weapons capability in 2006. However, such a goal seems incredibly optimistic in the current situation. North Korea’s nuclear program is increasingly useful to the regime. Analysts have pointed out that North Korea’s weapons serve many purposes: they act as a military deterrent, a domestic propaganda tool, a status symbol, a source of political leverage, and, potentially, a source of economic power through exportation of nuclear technology.\(^5\)

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\(^3\) Although North Korea’s ability to mount a nuclear weapon in an ICBM and safely deliver it to a target (including re-entering the atmosphere) has not been proven, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency assessed in August that North Korea’s current reentry vehicles would likely be sufficient to survive an intercontinental trajectory towards the United States. North Korea’s missile guidance capabilities are unclear, but a nuclear-armed missile would not need to be accurate to be capable of unacceptable destruction against its target.


Korea's accelerating programs of nuclear and missile tests\(^6\) indicate that its nuclear weapon ambitions are likely driven by security, rather than political, motivations. If so, neither concessions nor sanctions will suffice to coerce North Korea into compromising its security by giving up its nuclear weapons.

The use of force against North Korea is another proposed method to freeze or reverse nuclear progress in North Korea, either directly by destroying nuclear facilities or indirectly through coercion. The Trump administration has alluded to the use of force against North Korea in the last month, indicating that this option might still be under consideration in Washington.\(^7\) Military action against North Korea could take one of several forms: a massive preventative strike, intended to destroy its nuclear capabilities; a smaller decapitation strike, targeting Kim Jong-un and his inner circle; or limited military action, intended to harass North Korea and damage its ability to produce nuclear weapons without being severe enough to trigger a nuclear counterattack.\(^8\) However, any use of force against North Korea would run the risk of a severe counterattack from North Korea. Actions that the United States considers restrained will likely appear to leaders in Pyongyang as a signal of preventative war. Therefore, using force against North Korea in any capacity should be considered out of the question.

I previously mentioned that North Korea is characterized as irrational and paranoid. However, North Korea's behavior is not truly irrational: it has been threatened by a hostile United States for over half a century, and its militarization is in response to perceived American hostility towards it. North Korea's testing track record and public statements suggest that its nuclear weapons are an essential aspect of its national security, and it is difficult to imagine successfully coercing the North into making itself more vulnerable to attack. Proposals that seek to weaken North Korea, including expanding sanctions and conducting limited military actions, will only make the regime cling more firmly to its nuclear weapons by increasing its security concerns. Similarly, political or economic incentives to reward North Korea for taking steps to stop or reverse its nuclear weapons program are unlikely to change its behavior unless those incentives address the security concerns that have made nuclear weapons so essential to the North. If the U.S. ever expects North Korea to agree to reverse its nuclear program, it is necessary to consider North Korea's security situation.

It seems the only remaining pathway for the United States to safely and effectively address the North Korean nuclear issue is to work towards opening the lines of communication between the two states. In the short term, crisis management steps such as establishing military-to-military communications should be prioritized. North Korea is the only nuclear-armed state that does not have a high-level military communication link to the Joint Chiefs.\(^9\) Since nuclear war would be have unacceptable costs for both the U.S. and North Korea, the greatest risk of nuclear use in the ongoing confrontation will be accidental or due to miscommunication. Establishing a dialogue between American and North Korean military officials will greatly reduce the risk of a devastating miscommunication during a crisis. More broadly, opening negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang that emphasize compromise rather than coercion on the nuclear issue offer the best opportunity to actually achieve any freeze or reversal of North Korea's nuclear weapons developments.

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\(^7\) Acton, James. “North Korea: In Deterrence We Trust.” *The Diplomat*, 12 September 2017.

\(^8\) Bowden, Mark. “How to Deal With North Korea.” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2017.