

# Crossroads

## Why and How the US Must Revise and Revolutionize Its Approach to North Korea

1ST LT SHAQUILLE H. JAMES, USAF

In the wake of North Korea's 10 October 2020 military parade, in which the Kim regime unveiled what is speculated to be the world's largest road-mobile intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), it is clear that the United States is at a crossroads with North Korea. Decades of economic isolation and international pressure have done little to dissuade Pyongyang from its current course, and most observations are that North Korea has either achieved a legitimate nuclear deterrent or is very close to doing so. Though there may still be time to stop North Korea's nuclear and missile development, continued pressure and further isolation alone have little to no prospect of success. In the face of a changing and resilient challenge, Washington must adopt a strategy and policy that are novel, flexible, and equally resilient. This new policy must be based upon informed analysis and assessment of North Korean intentions and what can and cannot be reasonably expected of the regime. This approach, titled *strategic engagement*, aims to continue deterrence and pressure but simultaneously adopt a policy of engagement and openness to negotiation on a wider range of fronts separate from nuclear weapons, including the economic, cultural, scholastic, diplomatic, military, humanitarian, and civilian. The primary goal of this policy is not to achieve denuclearization but to first reduce—or contain—the threat that a nuclear North Korea poses, and then lay the foundation and trust necessary for not just future negotiations on nuclear weapons but also the engagement of the hearts and minds of the North Korean people and the planting of the seeds for meaningful societal change in North Korea from the ground up. This policy, conducted in conjunction with a negotiated freeze on North Korea's nuclear and missile testing, alters North Korea policy from one of reactive deterrence to one of proactive deterrence: deterring the threat while actively working to reduce the threat in a way not entirely hinged upon the success of negotiations on nuclear weapons and offering Pyongyang viable alternatives to and incentives to deviate from its current path.

The US policy of maximum pressure against North Korea has failed. Despite considerable damage to the North Korean economy, Pyongyang's missile and nuclear programs have steadily progressed forward, and nonkinetic provocations by the North Koreans still occur on occasion. Maximum pressure is not unique in

this regard—indeed, it is just the latest in a long lineage of failed US policies on North Korea. If Washington is to achieve its goals on the peninsula vis-à-vis North Korea, there must be a change in this policy. However, before the United States can work to establish a strategy for effective negotiations with the North Koreans, Washington must first develop a proper understanding of the North Korean threat.

Today, the most critical variable in establishing US policy on North Korea can be formulated into a simple question: Are the North Koreans truly willing to denuclearize? The answer to this question could determine whether nuclear-focused negotiations are even worthwhile. In this case, and at this point in time, the likely answer to this question is “no.” The North Koreans are likely not good-faith negotiators when it comes to nuclear weapons. This determination stems not necessarily from a degree of nefariousness on the part of the North Koreans but from a practical understanding of Pyongyang’s goals. Though it is possible that nefariousness plays a part, the paramount goal for the North Korean regime is always, above all else, survival. Despite some rhetoric to the contrary, *all* actions taken by North Korea—including the fielding of nuclear weapons, vast human rights abuses, cyber vandalism, and the food insecurity of the North Korean populace—are done for the singular goal of ensuring regime safety and survival. Furthermore, there are no actions taken by the regime that will work against this singular goal.

To this end, from the North Korean perspective, a bona-fide nuclear deterrent is a far more reliable guarantor of safety than any agreement with the United States. For the North Korean leadership, America’s reneging on nuclear agreements with countries such as Iran and assisting in regime change in countries lacking nuclear weapons—such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya—in addition to the liability of US leadership to change every four to eight years all paint a picture of unreliability on the part of the United States. As such, if the Kim regime’s goal is to survive and avoid military conflict with the United States, nuclear weapons are, on paper, a more stable option. The desire to survive and deter conflict, however, also means that Pyongyang is unlikely to use nuclear weapons without major provocation. This, when considered alongside the fact that North Korea has not yet demonstrated the ability to build and deliver a reliable and survivable nuclear warhead on an ICBM, implies that North Korean nuclear weapons currently do not yet pose an immediate and credible national security risk and the United States has no reason to expect or fear a sudden North Korean nuclear strike tomorrow. In other words, Washington still possesses a very valuable commodity in nuclear-focused negotiations: time.

And yet, given the history of policies such as maximum pressure and strategic patience, and given North Korea's apparent proximity to a credible nuclear deterrent, the odds of these policies ultimately denying North Korea its ambitions—whether by diplomatic success or economic and political pain—are slim, and the Kim regime is likely one day to achieve its deterrent. It would be incorrect, however, to take this to mean that continued negotiations with North Korea are not worthwhile; it only means that purely nuclear-focused negotiations are likely a nonstarter for the time being, and at least for as long as the regime believes nuclear weapons to be its best guarantee for survival. There is certainly still space for negotiations with the North Koreans, if the correct understandings and expectations are set. The best use of the remaining time is for the United States to formulate a new, informed, and reasonable North Korea policy cognizant of past failures.

To make a diplomatic breakthrough with the North Koreans, Washington must negotiate and engage like never before and on a much wider variety of fronts. Now is a particularly compelling time for this approach, as despite the inability of sanctions and pressure to stop North Korea's nuclear program, there has nevertheless been extensive damage done to the North Korean economy. Natural disasters and the anti-COVID-19 measures enacted by the Kim regime have exacerbated this social and economic damage and include a complete closure of the border with China, through which the great majority of North Korean trade flows. At a time when North Korea is politically, socially, and economically fragile and relations with China are not particularly good, there is a massive opening for the United States to provide an alternative for Pyongyang. To capitalize on this opening, Washington must pivot from its laser-like focus on North Korea's weapons programs and expand the totality of issues that it is willing to discuss and negotiate with or without success in the weapons program negotiations. The US leadership can achieve this pivot by adopting a policy of strategic engagement.

While it may be exceedingly difficult to negotiate North Korea's nuclear weapons away outright, it is nevertheless quite possible to reduce the threat that such weapons pose in the meantime. The central goal of strategic engagement is to create an environment in which there is a significantly reduced likelihood that North Korean nuclear weapons will be used and, eventually, create an environment in which legitimate denuclearization talks are more feasible and total denuclearization is a real possibility. To achieve this, Washington must be willing to not just negotiate but also engage with the North Koreans on issues other than nuclear weapons. Engagement, in this case, refers not simply to the offering of confessions but also to the forging of cultural, scholastic, diplomatic, economic, humanitarian, and perhaps even military rapports with the North Koreans as a

matter of long-term trust building. To forge these ties, the United States must be willing to make groundbreaking overtures to the North Koreans.

Such overtures can start relatively small. Washington, for example, could offer humanitarian aid in exchange for North Korea allowing further divided family reunions, particularly for Korean-Americans who have family members in North Korea. Following this, the United States may offer to send high-level diplomats to North Korea for public events and meetings with high-ranking government officials, perhaps, in return for North Korean transparency on kidnapped American, South Korean, and Japanese citizens.

If such lower-level overtures succeed, Washington can progress from there. For example, the United States can agree to offer small and preliminary forms of economic investment in North Korea in exchange for transparency on and solutions for North Korea's human rights situation. Alternatively, the United States can commit to scaling back military exercises or flyovers in return for a long-term freeze on North Korean nuclear and missile testing. Ultimately, if negotiations continue to go well and ties improve, Washington can take further, bolder steps: such as the lifting of a small number of sanctions in return for greater information and transparency on North Korea's nuclear facilities, program, and stockpile, in which a viable road to denuclearization is also discussed or agreed upon. The United States can also continue to make more innovative, lower-level overtures such as, for example, allowing North Korean students to study in American universities or organizing a series of workshops in which US and North Korean military officers meet in informal settings and discuss military issues. This can be offered perhaps in exchange for a direct and official line of communication with the North Korean leadership, though such a line should fall well short of formal diplomatic ties. These are just examples of possible avenues and do not reflect an actual policy road map.

While Washington must be willing to offer concessions in such negotiations, unlike past negotiations, no concessions should be granted without a corresponding, tangible North Korean concession of comparable magnitude. That being said, however, the United States must understand that strategic engagement is effectively a pivot from merely offering deterrence vis-à-vis North Korea to offering practical alternatives to Pyongyang's current path. While progress on such issues may not directly affect North Korea's nuclear program, there are many positives to this approach. Forging such ties can, primarily, reduce the Kim regime's anxiety about its security and thus, ideally, gradually decrease its willingness to use and need for nuclear weapons. Additionally, such overtures may also impart to the North Koreans that there is a viable, alternative path to safety, security, and prosperity that lies with cooperation with the United States and its allies.

Despite the emphasis on engagement, Washington must maintain a hard line on certain issues. The top four goals for the North Koreans: removal of sanctions, maintenance of peace, establishment of prosperity, and progress toward normalization, are carrots that the United States must hold in reserve and only negotiate when real progress is possible and the North Koreans are willing to offer major concessions in return. Sanctions, for example, must not be lifted in any way unless Pyongyang offers something significant in return—such as the total dismantling of North Korean political prison camps and/or the disbanding of its secret police apparatus, in response to which the United States may offer to lift a certain percentage of sanctions. Peace and normalization, similarly, should only be seriously negotiated if the Pyongyang is willing to agree to full and verifiable denuclearization, and economic investment should only occur if, for example, the regime is willing to enact social and economic liberalization or make significant changes in its behavior on the international stage regarding illicit activities and international terrorism.

By using this strategy, Washington can achieve progress on multiple goals at once. It can continue to deter the North Korean threat while also actively working to reduce the threat by nonmilitary means. Additionally, the United States can build the trust and rapport necessary to offer Pyongyang a viable alternative to the regime's current path and, perhaps, create the environment necessary for true denuclearization and normalization to take place. Furthermore, the forging of trust and a rapport with the North Koreans will not be limited to just the regime but will also include the North Korean populace as well. This wider front of engagement can help create a greater appetite for systematic change in North Korea down the line.

Such diplomatic overtures to Pyongyang can also help with clarifying the true North Korean stance on critical issues such as nuclear weapons and human rights, and thus better guide future US policy. If the regime is truly not willing to denuclearize under any circumstances, then the threat will nevertheless be significantly reduced due to success on other fronts, and the United States can use this experiment to better inform future, more hardline policy. That being said, Washington must again understand that many North Korean positions are assumed based upon the premise of regime survival. Pyongyang enacts certain policies because the regime views them as necessary for its political survival. If the United States is to make major breakthroughs with the North Koreans, US policy makers must consider how, or if, Washington can make it so that such policies are *no longer* essential to North Korean survival. Whether or not this is practical or possible is not yet clear, but success in this area can certainly allow the regime to better align its path to survival with reform, liberalization, and denuclearization in

North Korea. The viability of this approach can only be determined by engagement and the forming of trust between the United States and North Korea.

## **Conclusion**

Historically, negotiations and engagement with the North Koreans have not yielded many results in the areas of reform and denuclearization. In fact, some testimony from high-ranking North Korean defectors indicates that, during the sunshine era of the early 2000s, the primary goal of the North Korean regime was to extract as many concessions as possible during negotiations and not necessarily come to any agreements. Indeed, the memory of that failed policy looms heavy over efforts at negotiating or engaging with the Pyongyang today and in the future. However, the North Korea of 2020 is vastly different from the North Korea of the turn of the century. With a new generation of leadership and a slew of different challenges facing the country, it is nevertheless quite possible that Kim Jong-un and his regime have the stomach for an alternative course for North Korea—stomach that their predecessors lacked. With the recent moratorium on North Korean missile and nuclear tests and the damage dealt to the country's economic and social fabric by sanctions and the COVID-19 pandemic, the United States has, at present, a major opening for steering relations and negotiations with North Korea in a more positive and, as yet, unexplored direction. Strategic engagement, though by no means guaranteed to succeed, has at present a more significant chance of success than the continuation of maximum pressure exclusively. At this critical crossroads, and with time yet remaining, Washington needs a new North Korea policy with hope for success. Strategic engagement may just be that policy. 🌟

### **1st Lt Shaquille H. James, USAF**

Lieutenant James is a 13N ICBM operator and graduate of Georgetown University. He has worked extensively with North Korean defectors as well as with multiple agencies, organizations, and university programs relating to North Korean affairs. Lieutenant James graduated with a major in linguistics, a minor in Korean, and a certificate in Asian studies and has studied in multiple Asian countries and territories, including South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. He is currently a member of the Language Enabled Airman Program (LEAP).

### **Disclaimer**

The views and opinions expressed or implied in *JIPA* are those of the authors and should not be construed as carrying the official sanction of the Department of Defense, Department of the Air Force, Air Education and Training Command, Air University, or other agencies or departments of the US government or their international equivalents.