

The Price of Inattention: A Survivable North Korean Nuclear Threat?

The United States has been necessarily preoccupied, more or less simultaneously, with the Iran nuclear negotiations, containing and rolling back ISIS in the Middle East, opposing Russia's revanchist activities in Ukraine, dealing with the military drawn-down and political transition in Afghanistan, and rebalancing its forces in Asia to contend with China's increasingly expansionist behavior, especially in the South China Sea. So it is perhaps understandable that the Obama administration has paid only limited attention to the increasing nuclear and missile threat posed by the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). The recent artillery exchange and landmine incident between the two Koreas and the November 2014 uproar over the hacking of SONY Pictures, which allegedly was instigated by the North Korean government,¹ has provided important reminders that the DPRK remains self-isolated, highly unpredictable in its behavior, and heavily militarized. A young, inexperienced and autocratic leader rules the country, and recent pronouncements and behavior² have only underscored the long-standing paranoia on the part of the Kim family that the United States, the Republic of Korea, and Japan are intent on the country's overthrow.

The Obama administration came into office with the stated intention of "re-setting" the bilateral relationship with traditional adversaries, including both the DPRK and Iran.³ While the administration (together with the other members of the P5+1, or the permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) has succeeded in reaching agreement on a nuclear weapons deal

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with Iran that could end the trade embargo and open the door to normalized relations,⁴ no such progress or even serious engagement has occurred with respect to the North Korean nuclear weapons program. And while there has been extensive media coverage concerning the question of whether Iran has engaged in a surreptitious nuclear weapons development program, surprisingly scant attention has been paid to North Korea's pursuit of four parallel military initiatives:

- one focused on expanding significantly the amount of fissile material (plutonium and highly enriched uranium, or HEU) available and the expansion of a nuclear weapons stockpile;
- a second intended to develop and deploy a longer-range missile capable of reaching targets in the Pacific such as Guam, Hawaii, Japan, and the Aleutian island chain in Alaska;
- a third to develop a nuclear weapon of sufficiently small size and weight that it will fit atop the warhead of an intermediate-range and, ultimately, a long-range missile; and
- a fourth seeking to establish a survivable, strategic "deterrent" capability, primarily through deploying a road-mobile ballistic missile and/or a submarine-launched ballistic missile.

Despite the existence of export controls on sensitive nuclear and missile-related technology and broader U.N.-supported trade sanctions, it appears that the North is making progress on all four fronts.

New DPRK Nuclear and Missile Development Efforts

Despite UN sanctions resulting from unauthorized missile testing and development as well as a variety of export controls on sensitive nuclear and missile-related technology, North Korea has continued to pursue advanced military capabilities that, if allowed to proceed to deployment, potentially could

North Korea's new military capabilities could alter the military balance in Northeast Asia.

alter the military balance in Northeast Asia. There is both satellite imagery and credible deductive analysis to support this conclusion with respect to fissile material production and testing, long-range missile development, reduced size and weight of nuclear weapons designs, and the development of a survivable nuclear deterrent. (Given the totally closed nature of North Korean society, and especially its military, it is extremely difficult to obtain

verifiable “ground truth” on highly sensitive topics. Thus, organizations that monitor developments in the DPRK are forced to rely heavily on deductive analysis based on verifiable indicators (e.g., snow melting during the winter on the roof of a building in the DPRK nuclear complex, thereby indicating that is (a) in use, and (b) involved in a heat-producing process.)

Fissile material production and testing: Over the past few decades, the DPRK has sometimes attempted to send political and diplomatic signals by threatening to start up, actually starting up, or occasionally shutting down its plutonium “research reactor” at Yongbyon, which is capable of generating fuel for nuclear weapons. In the fall of 2014, for example, Reuters reported that the North appeared to have shut down the reactor, possibly to signal its renewed interest in multilateral nuclear negotiations.⁵ Yet the highly credible “38 North” website of the U.S.–Korea Institute at the Johns Hopkins University speculated that the DPRK may actually have had an entirely *different* reason for shutting down the reactor—namely, to remove plutonium as a prelude to a fourth nuclear test.⁶ Of the three nuclear tests the North has conducted to date (in 2006, 2009, and 2013), there is a general consensus that the fuel for the first two came from reprocessed plutonium drawn from its only known plutonium reactor at Yongbyon. The nature of the third nuclear device is less certain, since the DPRK is also thought to have made progress on a covert uranium enrichment program and may have accumulated enough HEU by 2013 to conduct a weapons test.

At the beginning of 2015, the North’s official Korean Central News Agency (KCNA) reported that the DPRK told the United States that it was willing to undertake a temporary halt on further nuclear testing,⁷ but only if the United States and the Republic of Korea stopped their annual joint military exercises, an option that both have consistently rejected. Reuters reported that satellite images taken between January and April 2015 indicated that the North had restarted both its reactor and an adjoining plant housing centrifuges used to enrich uranium.⁸ And just within the past few months, analyst Jeffrey Lewis reported on “38 North” that commercial satellite imagery indicated that the DPRK has modernized and expanded its capacity at a site near Pyongsan⁹ to mine uranium ore and mill it into yellowcake, which is the feedstock for enriched uranium. Adding additional supplies of fissile material would eliminate a major bottleneck in the DPRK weapons development program. While it is unclear whether this additional supply is intended for civilian power or to produce additional uranium weapons, it has led to speculation that North Korea could be in the process of expanding its nuclear weapons stockpile and potentially

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could possess 20 or more weapons by the end of 2016 and 50 or more weapons by 2020, if production were to proceed unimpeded.¹⁰

Clearly, if the DPRK were to build a nuclear weapons inventory of this size, it would change fundamentally the nature of the security threat that it poses, especially if it were also to develop a reliable means of delivery. It would certainly complicate any diplomatic effort to roll back and eventually eliminate nuclear weapons from the Korean peninsula. It would make it much more difficult to pinpoint the precise location of each weapon, in the event that they needed to be secured or destroyed, given that the North would almost certainly disperse the inventory to a number of secret, underground locations. A stockpile of this size would also raise the specter that the DPRK could sell weapons to other state actors or to a terrorist group in return for badly-needed hard currency, or raise the chance for weapons theft (though this scenario seems unlikely in the North Korean case). Finally, a significantly larger nuclear inventory would, in principle, give North Korea a limited second-strike capability, though it is not clear that they would have the capacity to actually *deliver* a second strike in the event of an all-out military conflict.

Long-range missile development: The last point above underscores the dangers that will arise if the DPRK is successful in its effort to develop a long-range missile capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. Indeed, the “38 North” website has reported on new, commercial satellite imagery indicating that engine tests have recently been conducted at the Sohae Satellite Launching Station, a site fairly close to the North Korean border with China, for a larger rocket engine that is likely intended for a longer-range missile known as the KN-08.¹¹ While this engine is likely intended to power an intermediate range missile capable of reaching targets in the western Pacific, other infrastructure changes observed at the Sohae test site suggest that the DPRK may be preparing to test an even *larger* rocket engine that potentially would be capable of powering inter-continental flight, meaning that it would be able to reach parts of the continental United States.

The operational deployment of the KN-08 would be a game-changer.

Until the KN-08 missile becomes operational, the DPRK’s only intermediate-range missile (defined as a weapon with a range of 3,000–5,500 km, or 1,864–3,418 miles) delivery system is the Rodong and its only longer-range missile is the Taepodong-2, both of which are based originally on semi-obsolete

SCUD missile technology developed many decades ago by the Soviet Union. The acquisition of an intermediate-range missile with a more powerful engine would potentially enable the North to hold at risk not just the Republic of Korea but also Japan, Guam, and possibly the western end of the Aleutian

Island chain in Alaska. Clearly, the ability to threaten U.S. territory does raise the stakes, though the accuracy and reliability of the long-range Taepodong-2 missile system makes the threat less than fully credible. But the operational deployment of the KN-08, if it were to possess a yet more powerful engine and improved guidance technology, would be a game-changer. It potentially would expand the threat radius to include Alaska, Hawaii, and parts of the western continental United States. And if the KN-08 is eventually topped by a nuclear warhead, the DPRK would then represent a strategic nuclear threat to the continental United States.

Most experts agree, however, that there are a number of important technological challenges that the North has yet to master including the acquisition of special materials and the development of a design that will survive atmospheric re-entry, a larger propulsion system, as well as more advanced targeting software. This suggests that the development of a workable ICBM system is likely still *at least* several years away, even with an all-out effort. In addition, the development of a reliable ICBM system would obviously require a series of test launches that would be readily observable by the United States and other nations in the Pacific theater through a variety of national technical means.

Reducing the size and weight of nuclear weapons designs: North Korea has to date conducted three underground nuclear tests and, as previously noted, there are indications that it may be preparing for a fourth test. The two most likely objectives of further testing, in addition to making a political statement, would be to determine (1) the viability of a smaller and lighter weapon design that could fit atop the KN-08 missile or be deliverable by fighter aircraft, and (2) the technical reliability of an HEU weapon versus a plutonium device. Most experts agree that the DPRK has not yet deployed a smaller and lighter nuclear weapon on the front end of a missile, although the reliability of this conclusion is limited by the lack of hard intelligence evidence based on testing.

Indeed, there are a considerable number of technical challenges that must be overcome to successfully miniaturize a nuclear weapon payload and enable it to survive the dynamic G-forces involved in launch and the heat and buffeting of re-entry. One big unknown in this regard is whether North Korea has received technical support from Pakistan, with whom it has cooperated in the past, or from any other nuclear-capable state. It seems reasonable to assume, however, that after three nuclear tests, the North has made at least some progress towards a smaller and lighter-weight weapon, even if it is not receiving outside assistance.

From a military standpoint, the fact that the DPRK has apparently not yet succeeded in reducing the size and weight of its nuclear weapons design means that

It is strongly suspected that North Korea has and may still be receiving assistance from Pakistan.

this threat remains largely theoretical. This is not to suggest, however, that the North is currently without *any* means of delivery. The two most likely means at the present time are aircraft, which would be vulnerable to air defenses due to the inferior technology, and some sort of ship-borne system, probably using short-range SCUD missiles. But the importance of the DPRK's nascent nuclear arsenal as a strategic deterrent will increase substantially when it is able to successfully test a miniaturized weapon design and to engineer the placement of a nuclear warhead on top of an intermediate- or long-range missile. It would seem evident that the acquisition of a viable nuclear deterrent is the primary—and perhaps the only—reason why the Kim regime is spending its limited national treasure on a highly expensive nuclear weapons development program. A statement attributed to Kim Jong-un underscored this rationale, which he delivered after the recent artillery exchange between the two Koreas when the state parties reached a compromise to defuse the situation: he allegedly said that peace was restored not through negotiation but thanks to the North's "tremendous military muscle with the nuclear deterrent for self-defense ..."¹²

Establishing a survivable nuclear deterrent: For a country pre-occupied with imagined—and in some cases real—threats to its national security and sovereignty, the acquisition of a survivable nuclear deterrent would make a profound difference. As suggested above, the North is seeking to acquire a military capability that would cause other nuclear-capable states to think twice before attacking, and hopefully decide that the inherent risks were simply too great. There are at least two different routes to this goal. The first is simply to expand the overall size of the North Korean nuclear inventory and disperse it to secure underground locations across the country, thereby improving its chances of survivability. But, as previously noted, the possession of nuclear weapons does not "deter" unless there is a credible means of delivery that would itself survive an attack by the North's perceived enemies.

Thus, the more worrisome *second* route is the DPRK's effort to develop either (a) an indigenous, submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM), or (b) a land-based road-mobile missile capability. The United States and Soviet Union during the Cold War placed a substantial portion of their respective nuclear deterrent aboard submarines that would be more likely to survive attack (other than by other submarines) and could cruise closer to each other's shores. In principle, a North Korean SLBM capability would offer many of the same advantages due to a submarine's maneuverability and its ability to hide from attackers. It must be noted, however, that the United States possesses highly sophisticated, anti-submarine capabilities—also developed during the decades of Cold War confrontation with the Soviet Union—that would make it difficult for North Korean submarines to evade detection and destruction.

Commercially available satellite imagery has identified the construction and land-based testing of an ejection launcher, a technology required to successfully eject missiles from a submerged submarine prior to ignition.¹³ Reports also have surfaced that North Korea may be in the process of developing a new diesel-powered submarine by reverse-engineering an imported, Soviet-era, Golf-class sub.¹⁴ The North is known to possess dozens of small submarines, but what is new about the recent satellite evidence is the apparent presence of vertical launch tubes that would enable a submarine to launch a missile from underneath the sea.

During the spring of 2015, there were a flurry of media reports, some of them emanating from the DPRK itself, indicating that the North had successfully tested a submarine-launched missile.¹⁵ Careful analysis of photographic evidence of the test later revealed, however, that the missile was actually launched from a submersible barge.¹⁶ Thus, it would appear that the acquisition of an actual SLBM launch capability is still in the future, but is being *actively* pursued. If this effort were ultimately to prove successful, a reliable solid-fueled SLBM system would give the DPRK a more survivable (though hardly invulnerable) nuclear deterrent. (The technical limitations of a liquid-fueled missile (e.g., volatility of the fuel and difficulty of storage on a submarine and comparatively long time requirements for loading) make it ill-suited for an SLBM. It was only when the United States was able to develop a solid-fueled missile during the Cold War that a nuclear attack submarine became a viable instrument of warfare and deterrence.)

Other commercially available satellite imagery indicates that North Korea also appears to be pursuing a road-mobile, transporter-erector-launcher (TEL) system.¹⁷ A road-mobile system is attractive because it, too, can make a nuclear deterrent more maneuverable and easier to hide. This is the reason that the United States and the Soviet Union each explored their own road-mobile ICBM systems during the Cold War.¹⁸ For the North, a road-mobile system also has the advantage of not requiring highly sophisticated technology, materials, or propulsion systems. A TEL system is likely intended for either an intermediate- or long-range missile, such as the KN-08, and could be dispersed widely within the country. In this case as well, the development of a reliable, solid-fueled missile capability would significantly enhance the viability of such a system since this would make it possible to erect and launch the missile far more rapidly. Admiral Samuel Locklear III, the Combatant Commander of U.S. Pacific Command, has stated publicly that while North Korea is not currently judged to possess a mobile TEL capability, the deployment of such a system would change the military calculus for the United States, given the increased difficulty of differentiating real missiles from decoys and then finding and neutralizing the real targets while they are on the move.¹⁹

Policy Options

At the present time, there are no publicly known diplomatic initiatives to engage the DPRK or to apply coordinated politico-military pressure to dissuade the North from continuing to work on all four military tracks. The more advanced and successful these projects become, the harder they will be to stop and roll back. The options available to the United States and its allies are less than appealing—essentially there are three: (a) impose secondary sanctions, (b) resuscitate the moribund Six-Party Talks, or (c) declare “red lines” for both missile and nuclear weapons development and state an intention to use pre-emptive military action if the DPRK ignores the warning.

Impose Secondary Sanctions?

Secondary sanctions are complicated and difficult to enforce, especially on a multilateral basis. Despite continuing multilateral sanctions and both unilateral and multilateral export controls on sensitive hardware, technical data, and designs related to nuclear weapons and missiles, North Korea has apparently been able to acquire surreptitiously both technical know-how and the parts and components that it cannot produce itself.

Little is known about the specific, in-bound channels that the DPRK uses for its technology acquisition effort, though there is speculation that they may involve the same individuals and organizations who are involved in smuggling drugs, counterfeit currency and small arms *out* of the country. The revenue generated from these illicit activities is a primary source of financing for the country’s advanced military programs. As was the case with the former Soviet Union during the Cold War, North Korea has apparently developed indigenous capabilities to overcome its inability to import needed materials and technology—witness the effort to reverse-engineer the obsolete Soviet submarine. Thus, at the present time, the principal rate-limiting factor constraining the DPRK’s development of these new strategic capabilities is the availability of hard currency and, in a few specific cases, the lack of certain technical know-how or access to advanced materials (e.g., carbon fiber for the “front end” of missile warheads to withstand the extreme heat of atmospheric re-entry).

It is strongly suspected that North Korea has received—and may still be receiving—external assistance from other state parties, most notably Pakistan. It is likely that North Korea previously provided Pakistan with technical assistance for its missile development program, and that Pakistan may have reciprocated by offering the DPRK similar technical assistance for its effort to develop a nuclear weapon. There also has been extensive coverage of the black market, nuclear hardware, and know-how that the North received via the A.Q. Khan proliferation network (Abdul Qadeer Khan, the so-called “father” of the Pakistani nuclear weapons

program, was discovered to have engaged for many years in selling highly sensitive nuclear technology and designs to a number of aspiring nuclear states including the DPRK, Iran, Libya, and possibly other countries). And the North may have had similar *quid pro quo* relationships with other nations including Iran, Libya, and Syria. In the latter case, in September 2007, the Israelis attacked and destroyed a nuclear reactor site in Syria that was being constructed with significant assistance from the DPRK.

The extent to which either Russia or China might, in the past, have provided direct assistance to the DPRK nuclear and/or missile programs has been a subject of conjecture, but there is no publicly available corroborating evidence to support such an assertion. It is well established, however, that North Korea's short-range SCUD missile was based on an old design that was originally manufactured in the Soviet Union and later exported. It is also clear that China has been and remains the North's most prominent protector and closest ally. In this respect, China plays a dual role: it helps to keep the Kim regime afloat with food, energy, luxury goods, and hard currency, while it also remains the only nation capable of prodding the North to engage diplomatically. China has served as the primary convener of the Six-Party Talks on de-nuclearizing the Korean peninsula, talks that have now been in suspension since 2009. Whatever the past Russian and Chinese military relationships with the DPRK, neither country is interested today in seeing the North acquire a more advanced, and more threatening, military capability. The question remains, however, whether either country, especially China, is prepared to do more to convince North Korea to alter course.

Re-start the Six-Party Talks?

Clearly, the most desirable option to counter the North Korean military programs is to re-start the Six-Party Talks—between the DPRK, the United States, China, the Republic of Korea, Japan, and Russia—and push for a diplomatic solution. The Obama administration has maintained consistently that it is open to pursuing diplomacy, much like the recently concluded negotiations with Iran, but that it is unwilling to re-engage unless the North Korean side demonstrates serious interest in reaching an agreement to suspend and eventually abandon its nuclear weapons program. The North, for its part, insists that, having tested a nuclear device three times, it is now a nuclear weapons state and intends to remain one. The DPRK is also in violation of several UN resolutions prohibiting the development and testing of ballistic missiles, but it has shown no interest in suspending, much less giving up, its long-range missile program. So the diplomatic positions of the two sides are extremely difficult to reconcile, and there is a long history of failed talks and broken agreements.

Perhaps the most well-known example of broken promises was the so-called “Agreed Framework,” under which the DPRK agreed to suspend its production of plutonium and to make its reactor subject to international inspection in return for a large supply of heavy fuel oil and other benefits. The United States and the DPRK signed this deal in 1994, but it broke down in 2003 amidst mutual recriminations that revealed the extent of mistrust, outright deception,²⁰ and conflicting political agendas that continue to poison the relationship to the

present day.

The United States should be prepared to make some bold moves to break the Six-Party deadlock.

For diplomacy to have any chance of success, North Korea must obviously first agree to come to the negotiating table. Unfortunately, the pattern in the recent past has been that the North makes an extensive set of unilateral (and often unreasonable) demands that it says must be fulfilled *before* it will even agree to talk. While this pattern must not be repeated, the United States

should be prepared to make some bold moves to break the deadlock, steps such as committing to redeploy more U.S. forces away from the 38th parallel, or agreeing to suspend the annual joint military exercises with South Korea that the North considers a direct provocation. The United States also could re-confirm its willingness, as part of a negotiated nuclear and missile agreement, to officially end the state of hostilities that has continued to exist since the signing of the Armistice on July 27, 1953, through a multilateral peace treaty to end the Korean War. But in the end, none of these enticements are likely to alter the status quo as long as North Korea is able to bypass existing sanctions and continue to receive support and political cover from China. Thus, the prospects for resuscitating the Six-Party Talks, while still an avenue worth pursuing, appear rather remote; and even if they are reconvened, they do not enjoy a high probability of success.

Change U.S. Declaratory Policy to Include the Right of Pre-emption?

A third policy option is pre-emptive military action. The United States could make clear through its declaratory policy that it will take decisive military action to prevent North Korea from deploying nuclear weapons and a missile delivery capability that threatens either U.S. territory or the territory of its allies. Of course, in reality, the DPRK *already* can hold Japan and South Korea at risk, and the United States has responded mainly by deploying defensive systems (such as the *Aegis* anti-missile systems aboard U.S. warships in the Pacific Fleet) and facilitating the sale of *Patriot* anti-missile systems to both countries. In addition, through its existing defense agreements, which include

security guarantees, the United States is committed to come to the aid of Japan or the Republic of Korea if their territorial sovereignty is threatened.

Precisely what military action the United States can and should be prepared to take is, of course, the question. This is particularly salient in view of the fraught history of confrontations across the 38th parallel and the vulnerability of the more than 10 million people living from Seoul northwards in the Republic of Korea—all of whom are within artillery and MLRS (multiple-launch rocket systems) range of the border. In reality, the United States would have to be prepared to attack and destroy missile launch platforms, both fixed and mobile; SLBM-capable submarines that may be deployed or under construction; military infrastructure, including assembly facilities and storage depots; and other nuclear weapons development sites.

Given North Korea's propensity for placing militarily sensitive capabilities in tunnels or other hardened, underground facilities, the kinetic engagement of these targets will present a formidable challenge. Moreover, it also seems unlikely that the North would absorb even a carefully targeted, selective attack without initiating some sort of *quid pro quo* retaliation on the Korean peninsula, or possibly elsewhere in the region.

At least twice during the reign of the Kim family, the United States has considered attacking North Korea's nuclear production and/or missile launch infrastructure. The first occurred in 1993–94 during the crisis associated with the DPRK's refusal to grant access by IAEA inspectors to its plutonium reactor at Yongbyon, and its subsequent suspension (and later abrogation) of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). I served in the Department of Defense during this period, and it undertook active contingency planning to prepare for the destruction of the reactor. Ultimately, however, a kinetic solution became unnecessary as a result of successful diplomacy: the DPRK and the United States signed the Agreed Framework in October 1994.

The U.S. has considered attacking DPRK nuclear and/or missile infrastructure at least twice.

A military solution was again advocated in 2006 when the North began preparations for active testing of a longer-range Taepodong missile. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter, who was then at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, and former Secretary of Defense William Perry co-authored an op-ed piece in *The Washington Post* in which they argued that the United States should announce its intention to use cruise missiles to destroy the missile launch facility if North Korea did not suspend its testing plans.²¹ As might be expected, the Carter-Perry op-ed engendered a variety of reactions. Some applauded it, stating that it was necessary to draw a bright line for the North Koreans in

terms of the type of provocative and threatening weapons development activities that the United States would not tolerate. Others were critical, arguing that an attack by the United States, even if confined solely to the North's missile launch complex, could well lead to a disproportionate and dangerous North Korean military response that could re-open hostilities across the 38th parallel and place Seoul at risk.

Ultimately, no pre-emptive military action was taken. The missile test ended in failure, and the only U.S. response was the deployment of a guided missile destroyer to Japan. But there was a substantial amount of public diplomacy from all of the nations participating in the Six-Party Talks (including China), decrying the North Korean tests. Given that the Six-Party Talks were continuing at this time, all parties seemed to be attempting to strike a balance between responding critically to the DPRK's unilateral action while at the same time seeking to keep the North engaged in the multilateral diplomacy. In this respect, the case offers an excellent example of the complexity and sensitivity of dealing with North Korea; but it also leaves unanswered the question of how (or whether) the DPRK would have responded militarily if the United States had followed the Perry-Carter prescription and destroyed the Taepodong launch facility.

Serious Problems, Limited Options

None of the three policy options available to the United States—imposing secondary sanctions, re-starting the Six-Party Talks, or threatening to take pre-emptive military action—is ideal. All three involve complications, if not outright risk, that limit their appeal, and there is certainly no guarantee that any of them will elicit the desired response from the DPRK. Yet, it is apparent that North Korea is moving ahead as fast as its constrained financial resources and technical know-how permit in order to deploy a limited strategic nuclear deterrent. At the same time, as of this writing, the North has *not* conducted a long-threatened fourth nuclear test, nor has it tested a new longer-range missile. It is impossible to determine, however, whether these tests have been delayed as a result of technical or engineering problems, or if the delay is actually a tactical decision to hold off temporarily in order to take stock of the political and diplomatic options.

Some long-time DPRK watchers also continue to express doubt that *any* of the North's nuclear and missile development work represents a real escalation of the actual threat posed either to the United States or to its northeast Asian allies. They argue that this is all about the DPRK seeking to gain the attention of the Obama administration and convincing it to re-engage diplomatically at a time when U.S. attention is necessarily focused elsewhere.²² Indeed, at least until the recent hacking attack against SONY Pictures, North Korea had found little

alternative leverage with which to get the attention of the U.S. *other* than by taking steps to escalate, or threaten to escalate, the military threat that it poses to South Korea and Japan.

The bottom line is that the United States can no longer afford to ignore the security threat that the DPRK will pose if it succeeds in deploying a smaller and more powerful nuclear weapon and a longer-range missile delivery system. Such a nuclear “break-out” scenario could occur much more rapidly than is generally appreciated should the North proceed with further testing. In this event, the United States would be forced to divert its political focus as well as precious military hardware, personnel, and financial resources from other global hotspots, especially in the Middle East where it is already deeply engaged and where U.S. national security and foreign policy interests are also at stake.

Failure to dissuade North Korea from continuing on its current path would mean ultimately that the Kim regime *will* succeed in developing a strategic nuclear capability with at least some degree of survivability as well as an intermediate-range—and eventually a long-range—missile delivery system. When this happens, the United States, as well as the Republic of Korea and Japan, will face a new and unwelcome security environment. While a nuclear-capable DPRK might not necessarily represent a true existential threat, it will certainly have the capacity to cause widespread damage and mass casualties if it were to launch an attack. Such an attack ultimately would be suicidal for the Kim regime and to North Korea, but it is impossible to know whether traditional deterrence theory and practice would prove successful, given the country’s isolation and inward-focused behavior.

Given the stakes, and given the diplomatic intractability and difficulty of dealing with the North, it is perhaps no wonder that the Obama administration has been content to leave the problem on the back-burner during the past six years. But continuing to play for time, in hopes that the autocratic Kim Jong-un will be overthrown or that he will decide unilaterally to change his policy approach, is neither realistic nor a viable option. Planners must update military contingencies and actual battle plans, and policymakers must put in place an effective strategy that can be implemented in the event that the North tests another nuclear weapon or a longer-range ballistic missile.

The United States and its allies must be ready to send a firm and resolute message that they will not permit the DPRK to gain the capacity to threaten, much less carry out, mass casualty attacks using nuclear weapons or to transfer nuclear and/or missile technology to third countries or non-state actors, as it has

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done on a number of previous occasions.²³ After many years of mostly fruitless diplomatic efforts, it has become evident that the successive Kim regimes respond *only* to firmness and to clear statements of declaratory policy and intentions. It is time, therefore, for the Obama administration (and for the next president, who will be elected in 2016) to state unambiguously that it will impose secondary sanctions and resort to pre-emptive military action if additional nuclear or missile tests take place, or if North Korea deploys new and threatening military systems.

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