

To: Erin Meegan, Legislative Director
From: Asher Illick-Frank, Intern
Re: North Korea's Nuclear Threats
Date: November 16, 2022

PANELISTS: Moderator David Oxtoby, President of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; Steven Miller, Director of the International Security Program at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School; Mark Fitzpatrick, Executive Director of the Americas office of the International Institute for Strategic Studies and Head of the institute's Non-Proliferation and Nuclear Policy Program; Susan DiMaggio, Senior Fellow at Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

LEGISLATION/ASK: No direct legislation or ask. Briefing was on the history and current position of North Korea as a nuclear power. Recommendations for the US to reestablish a line of communication.

THREE KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. There have been an unprecedented 76 North Korean missile tests this year, 4 of which were ICBM's that would be capable of hitting the continental United States.
2. The US's policy is *irreversible dismantlement* and North Korea's policy is *irreversible nuclearization*.
3. Demanding that Kim Jong-Un denuclearize is a dead end in the near term. We need to establish a sustained line of communications and implement a timeline with denuclearization at its end.

SUMMARY:

After a few relatively quiet years on the peninsula, we have seen a return of North Korean provocation. Communication channels relating to North Korea have been reduced. There have been an unprecedented 76 missile tests this year, four of which were ICBM's that would be capable of hitting the continental United States. They have tested a hypersonic missile, designed to evade detection, and are working towards tactical nuclear weapons. The North Korean military has an emphasis on operational planning and evaluating combat readiness.

North Korea's launch sites are so diverse and numerous that they could quickly launch. They have research that covers every process of the uranium enrichment cycle. They have a 5-megawatt power plant in their Yongbyon nuclear research facility that continues to produce plutonium, as well as another secret site producing enriched uranium. In an assessment by a Russian think tank, North Korea has enough fissile material for about 50 nuclear bombs and there is no doubt that they can miniaturize the weapons for use in ICBMs and short-range missiles. The assessment is unsure whether they have the technology to miniaturize the weapons to the sizes needed for a tactical nuclear weapon, but it is likely.

North Korea just announced a new nuclear law that confirmed their status as a nuclear weapons state. This new law gives Kim Jong-Un sole authority over any decision to use nuclear weapons. The law also stipulates that the nuclear weapons would automatically be launched in any attack against North Korea's strategic command or government. This is a nuclear first use policy, with a hair trigger in a crisis, and a lot of room for mistaken calculation.

North Korea is unlikely to give up nuclear weapons. It is central to their policy of deterrence towards the US. They want an insurance policy if they were to lose military support from Russia and China. North Korea might want nuclear weapons to contribute to their state's goal of uniting the peninsula, with the thought that their weapons might deter the US from coming to South Korea's aid. North Korea has agreed in the past to denuclearization in various deals, all of which were ultimately broken over verification disputes and accusations of cheating. A 1994 agreement stopped production of plutonium, but North Korea didn't get rid of the program and they eventually produced enriched uranium.

The US's policy is *irreversible dismantlement* and North Korea's policy is *irreversible nuclearization*. This has been our policy goal for three decades, and it is also the policy of Japan and

South Korea. It would be hard for the US to drop the denuclearization goal, and if we did, it would look as if we were accepting North Korea's nuclear weapons. The US tried cyber-attacks, which did stop one particular kind of missile from testing, but did not stop the testing of more ICMBs. We have spent \$170 billion on missile defense but it is still unreliable and will continue to be for 15 years. The US, South Korea, and Japan agreed to share real-time missile data. They have carried out a trilateral test to detect incoming missiles. President Bush launched an initiative of intelligence sharing and joint naval operations to stop ships carrying WMDs. We have tried strategic patience under Obama, personal diplomacy under Trump, and Biden is back to strategic patience. Obama made offers to talk with North Korea premised on denuclearization. Biden continues to sanction parties involved with North Korea. We could seek alternative goals, like a moratorium on testing, a cap on fissile material production, and the dismantlement of the Yongbyon complex. Without plutonium it would be harder to make new, better nuclear weapons.

Global dysfunction has sidelined the UN security council. The council has not agreed to any new measures against North Korea in four years. Washington and Moscow used to have serious discussions about Yongbyon, but since the invasion of Ukraine, there is no expectation of a constructive dialogue. We have seen the development of an alliance of sanctioned countries, but that alliance has limits. As Russia struggles in Ukraine, there is not a desire for a conflict in the east. China also does not want a conflict as it would result in a mass influx of refugees. Since the collapse of talks in 2019, North Korea has rejected proposed negotiations.

Pressing for full denuclearization isn't a good approach. Demanding that Kim Jong-Un denuclearize is a dead end in the near term. Any attempt to step away from denuclearization will be met by strong pushback from Congress, both from Democrats and Republicans. The approach should be focused on what is possible. The Biden administration needs to establish a sustained line of communication, then use this channel to implement a timeline with denuclearization at its end. The US might envision a solution as series of agreements, but we need to recognize that there are many other important elements we need to control.

Q+A SECTION:

Is there anything short of some sort of diplomatic breakthrough that could surmount some of the obstacles to a safer environment?

DiMaggio: I think the 2019 summit in Hanoi, for Kim Jong-Un, was a failure and humiliation. He did put their nuclear complex on the table but asked for too much in return. That negative experience really soured the idea of direct talks with the Trump administration. The North Koreans have been intent on developing their program, they have been using the time since the summit to further develop technical nuclear ability.

One of the issues that has loomed large in the region is our effort to enhance our missile capabilities in the region. Is this an effective strategy?

Fitzpatrick: I think missile defense is a pie in the sky; it costs so much money and is not able to protect the US against incoming ICBMs. The US estimates it takes 4 interceptors to take down each ICBM, and this is before North Korea implements decoy and other. THAAD and Patriot batteries might be a bit more effective in Japan.

ANALYSIS: North Korea is firmly set on its irreversible nuclearization. Their nuclearization is a key deterrent against attack of another country, and furthers their goal to reunite the Korean Peninsula. We have invested \$170 billion on missile defense systems that still has a low likelihood of effective interception. We need to rely on diplomacy. The country has walked away from talks many times. For negotiations to take place, a more long-term approach has to be taken with denuclearization at the end of the timeline.