**North Korea Nuclear Crisis**

**SUMMARY OF CASE**

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) has for decades pursued its nuclear ambitions to the dismay of both Western countries and its neighbors in East Asia. It recently announced the successful launch of a satellite from a three-stage rocket, and U.S. and allied intelligence services conclude that North Korea now possesses the reentry technology for an intercontinental ballistic missile that could reach the North American west coast. The director of national intelligence informs the president that the missile launch, combined with North Korea’s ongoing nuclear tests and its mastery of warhead miniaturization technology, means the country is capable of following through on past threats to fire a nuclear-armed missile against the United States. The president has called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to discuss how to respond to North Korea’s enhanced capabilities.

**Issue Background**

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) has for decades pursued its nuclear ambitions, to the dismay of both Western countries and its neighbors in East Asia. North Korea first tested a nuclear device in 2006 after withdrawing in 2003 from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), the 1968 international agreement that, among other things, seeks to limit the spread of nuclear weapons to the United States, Russia, China, the United Kingdom, and France. UN Security Council Resolution 1718 condemned the test, and, within weeks, North Korea returned to the Six Party Talks (among the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and both North and South Korea) on denuclearization which had begun in 2003. North Korea then implemented steps toward dismantlement of some of its nuclear facilities in 2007 and 2008.

Days before the inauguration of U.S. President Barack Obama in January 2009, however, North Korea declared that it was abandoning nuclear talks. It subsequently launched a satellite using a multistage rocket in April and conducted a second nuclear test in May. In response, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1874, imposing sanctions intended to block North Korean nuclear and missile imports, as well as its trade in conventional arms. Following the 2011 death of North Korea’s longtime dictator Kim Jong-il and the assumption of leadership by his son Kim Jong-un, the United States and North Korea announced, through parallel declarations on February 29, 2012, a freeze in North Korea’s nuclear development and a return to denuclearization talks. However, that agreement, called the Leap Day Understanding, was scuttled weeks later by a North Korean announcement that it would conduct another satellite launch in April 2012. In December 2012 and February 2013, North Korea conducted another satellite launch and its third nuclear test. In March 2013, it adopted a policy of simultaneous nuclear and economic development (known as byungjin) as the central policy of the Kim Jong-un era.

Chinese President Xi Jinping stated China’s opposition to North Korea’s February 2013 nuclear test and, at a June 2013 summit, pledged to work with President Obama to achieve North Korea’s denuclearization. Since then, North Korean nuclear and missile activity has continued apace. North American Aerospace Command (NORAD) Strategic Commander William Gortney stated in April 2015 that he assessed that North Korea has the capability to strike the continental United States with a nuclear weapon, although such capability has not been proven through testing. A fourth North Korean nuclear test and additional satellite launch in January and February 2016 catalyzed a new UN Security Council resolution and even harsher sanctions on North Korean financial and trade relationships. In response, North Korea conducted a flurry of medium- and intermediate-range missile tests and tests of atmospheric reentry in an attempt to speed up its development of a deliverable nuclear weapons capability. It also claimed advances in miniaturizing nuclear warheads, which is necessary for delivering them via missiles to the United States or other targets. At the country’s May 2016 Worker’s Party congress, Kim Jong-un declared that North Korea’s nuclear weapons development was important for the country’s “national dignity” and vowed to make North Korea a “permanent nuclear state,” even as he signaled openness to improved relations with South Korea (formally the Republic of Korea, or ROK) and the United States. In September, North Korea conducted its fifth nuclear test and declared that the country has now “standardized” its nuclear warhead design, hinting at the ability to deliver a nuclear weapon on a missile. North Korea now has a reliable nuclear weapons capability to hit Japan and South Korea, though not the United States. After more than eighty days of negotiations, the UN Security Council passed Resolution 2321 in November 2016, imposing a limit on North Korea’s coal exports to China and an additional ban on North Korea’s exports of copper, nickel, silver, and zinc.

Despite sanctions and diplomatic efforts to convince North Korea and its leadership to change direction and denuclearize, Kim Jong-un has affirmed his vision of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state and continues to pursue the ability to strike the United States with a nuclear weapon. He also seeks to deter any initial nuclear or conventional strike by the United States by building a nuclear arsenal that could survive such a strike. Analysts assess that if Kim Jong-un attains those capabilities, the task of dealing with the North Korean threat will grow more complex. In addition, this would strain South Korean faith in U.S. promises to defend South Korea from a North Korean nuclear attack. The United States maintains a formal alliance with South Korea, which includes a treaty commitment to defend South Korea if it is attacked. The two countries could also face more intense North Korean provocations. For instance, the North Koreans might escalate tensions by attacking vulnerable South Korean territory or military targets and demand exorbitant economic benefits in return for de-escalating the crisis.

**Decision Point**

North Korea recently announced the successful launch of a satellite from a three-stage rocket, claiming that the satellite was successfully orbiting the earth and transmitting songs in praise of Kim Jong-un. U.S. destroyers confirmed that rocket debris had landed in the Yellow Sea and about 150 miles off the coast of the Philippines, but the North American Aerospace Command (NORAD) failed to detect the successful orbit of the satellite. The launch came days after Kim suspended nuclear negotiations with the United States, citing concerns over inspections of its nuclear sites.

Two days later, an Australian cargo vessel reported the discovery of an object with Korean language markings one hundred miles northwest of the port of Darwin. The object, which was confirmed to be the intact satellite, was equipped with heat shields and other features suggesting that it had reentered the atmosphere intact. After analyzing the debris, U.S. and allied intelligence services have concluded that, given the satellite’s ability to successfully reenter the atmosphere, North Korea now possesses the reentry technology for an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that could reach the west coast of North America. The director of national intelligence informs the president that the missile launch, combined with North Korea’s ongoing nuclear tests and its mastery of warhead miniaturization technology, means the country is for the first time capable of following through on past threats to fire a nuclear-armed missile at the United States. The president has called a National Security Council (NSC) meeting to discuss how to respond to North Korea’s enhanced capabilities.

**POLICY DECISIONS**

The United States has few viable policy options toward North Korea. They include the following:

**1. Manage the impact of North Korea’s nuclear and missile capability.** The United States could try to manage the potential impact of North Korea’s expanded capability by slowing down North Korean nuclear and missile efforts as much as possible and by turning to deterrence and defense. This policy would have three elements. The first is nonproliferation, which would include such things as expanding sanctions and persuading other relevant parties, notably China, to do the same; cracking down on North Korea’s illicit activities abroad to prevent the regime from obtaining hard currency; and better coordinating crackdowns on illicit trade in nuclear and missile-related materials. Also as part of nonproliferation, the United States would remain open to denuclearization negotiations should North Korea credibly seek to reopen them. The second element is deterrence. The United States would build on existing efforts to deter any North Korean use of nuclear weapons, for instance, by signaling that such use would prompt U.S. action that would be catastrophic and regime-ending for the North Korean leadership. The U.S. military would also maintain robust deterrence through greater cooperation and joint interoperability with Japan and South Korea. The third element is defense. In this realm, the United States would deploy and integrate with its allies' missile defense systems, such as the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD).

All of these efforts would be driven by the assumption that North Korea is highly unlikely to negotiate its own denuclearization under any circumstance and that the best path forward is to put North Korea in a box until the regime collapses or changes. This is the least ambitious option, essentially a continuation of existing U.S. policy. Under this approach, the United States would not be seeking to change anything fundamental about the situation on the Korean Peninsula, unlike option 2 (try to work with China to denuclearize North Korea or bring down the regime) and option 3 (use military force to reduce or eliminate the North Korean nuclear threat). Accordingly, this option is the least demanding from the U.S. perspective. However, it would also achieve the least. The broad outlines of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs would likely remain in place indefinitely, posing a continued threat to the United States and its allies. As noted, this threat continues to intensify, posing ever-greater strategic challenges. The management option could be attractive, however, should NSC members find the other options too risky or uncertain.

**2. A grand bargain with China.** The United States could pursue an ambitious diplomatic agreement with China about what a unified Korean Peninsula—or one with a denuclearized North Korea—would look like. The goal would be to reassure China about U.S. actions and policies so that China would agree to abandon its traditional support of North Korea. Ideally, this would produce either the collapse of the Kim regime and the unification of the peninsula under agreed terms, or a decision by Kim to give up his nuclear weapons and cease his threats to the United States and its allies. The United States, in consultation with South Korea, would enter into talks with China and offer an array of inducements contingent on a transformation of the situation on the peninsula. These might include

* removal of the THAAD system;
* reductions in the number of U.S. troops on the Korean Peninsula (but without ending the U.S.-South Korea alliance);
* a promise that remaining U.S. military personnel would be stationed well south of the 38th parallel;
* a pledge not to form a U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral alliance; and guaranteed aid and loans to help rebuild and stabilize northern Korea.

In return, China would be asked to pull all political, economic, and military support for the Kim regime, including in the areas of trade, their bilateral security treaty, and diplomatic cover at the United Nations. Should the Kim government collapse or give up its nuclear weapons, the United States would then proceed as agreed in the initial bargain with China.

Because North Korea relies on China to provide most of its food and fuel, China has the necessary leverage to put the survival of the Kim Jong-un regime at risk. This strategy would attempt to convince China to risk the consequences of instability on its border and give up North Korea as a buffer state. The strategy would do so by recognizing China’s leverage and seeking to satisfy many of its strategic concerns about the U.S. military presence and other elements of U.S. policy on the Korean Peninsula.

Although perhaps desirable, a sweeping agreement with China would likely be difficult to achieve. Chinese leaders may continue to conclude that the immediate and long-term consequences of North Korea’s collapse would outweigh the challenge of dealing with North Korea as it is. Still, if the United States and China did come to terms, and this resulted in a unified peninsula or a nonnuclear North Korea, the positive consequences for the security of the Korean Peninsula and Asia more broadly could be profound and enduring.

**3. Preventive military strikes.** The United States could launch air strikes to destroy as many missile and nuclear-related sites and equipment as possible to set back North Korea’s nuclear weapons and delivery program for years and, hopefully, indefinitely. Given the current phase of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, the scale of military strikes required to prevent North Korean use of its nuclear capabilities would be significant.

This option offers a considerable potential benefit: a long-term reduction in the threat posed by North Korea’s missiles and nuclear weapons. Successful preventive strikes would increase the security of the United States and its allies, and demonstrate the strength of the United States’ commitment to nonproliferation and to combating North Korea’s provocations. This could send an effective message to North Korea and others about the fruitlessness of seeking to develop nuclear weapons.

However, with these potential upsides come two significant questions. The first is whether the United States could successfully achieve its objective of meaningfully damaging North Korea’s nuclear facilities and missiles. The United States cannot be confident that it knows where all such targets are located, raising the prospect that North Korea would retain substantial capabilities even after the strikes. In addition, the knowledge necessary to build a nuclear weapon cannot be destroyed militarily.

The second question involves the risk of North Korean retaliation against the United States and against Japan and South Korea, allies that the United States is bound by treaty to defend. Seoul, South Korea’s densely populated capital, is particularly vulnerable because of its proximity to North Korea. The tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers in South Korea are also at risk. Even limited retaliation by the North Koreans could lead to a large number of deaths and a high level of destruction in Seoul. If the North Koreans fear losing their nuclear weapons, they might also decide to use them first. Last is the risk of death, injury, or capture to any U.S. personnel deployed into or over North Korea as part of the airstrike campaign. The scale of military strikes required also means that the likelihood of escalation is very high.

**Other Interested Parties**

**China:** China is the external actor on the Korean Peninsula that has the greatest material influence on North Korea. Almost all of North Korea’s trade crosses its border with China. China has a security treaty with North Korea, and long-standing political and ideological ties. North Korea would probably not be able to survive without Chinese economic support. Although the Chinese have become increasingly disparaging of North Korea under Kim Jong-un, China still sees North Korea as a strategic buffer against a South Korea allied with the United States. China also seeks to prevent North Korea’s collapse, fearful that such an event could destabilize the region.

In recent years, however, China-North Korea relations have deteriorated greatly due to North Korea’s continued nuclear and missile provocations. China recognizes that North Korea is a potential source of instability that has helped justify the large U.S. military, diplomatic, and economic presence in Asia and has prompted increased Japan-South Korea security cooperation. The North Koreans, for their part, have never trusted the Chinese and see them as seeking to turn North Korea into a vassal state. The two countries, however, continue to maintain their relations out of mutual strategic interest.

**Japan:** Japan no longer trades with North Korea or has any influence over the country. However, the North Koreans now have the capacity to hit Japan with nuclear-tipped missiles. Because Japan is a quasi-ally of South Korea, closer security cooperation between those two countries on issues such as intelligence sharing and missile defense would bolster deterrence against North Korea and increase pressure on the regime.

**Russia:** Russia, though not as important to North Korea as the Soviet Union was, is still relevant, given the shared border between Russia and North Korea and Russia’s continuing, if limited, interest in energy projects involving the North. Most important is Russia’s permanent, veto-bearing seat on the UN Security Council. Without Russia’s support there, the policies and actions of the United States and its allies might not be deemed wholly legitimate. Hence, Russia’s cooperation in the Security Council helps foster a unified global response against the North Korean threat.