

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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What to do about North Korea?

North Korea recently launched an intercontinental ballistic missile, a vivid demonstration of its potential nuclear reach. The missile traveled only 580 miles, but in doing so it traveled 1,700 miles into space and re-entered the atmosphere before crashing into the Sea of Japan. If you flatten this out, such a missile could reach Alaska. This frightening reality means that North Korea is on the verge of reaching a capability to attack the homeland of the United States with nuclear missiles. This rogue regime of Kim Jong-un is boisterous, bombastic and arrogant; but its developing nuclear program coupled with these ballistic missile tests make for a formidable problem in world affairs. Apparently, one of the last things President Obama said to incoming President Trump was “your most important foreign policy challenge will be North Korea.” What should the US do?

- First of all, focusing so obsessively on developing nuclear weapons that can be mounted on a ballistic missile seems absurd for a nation with an economy smaller than Birmingham, Alabama. As David C. Kang of the Korean Studies Institute reports, North Korea is “experiencing a humanitarian disaster. The number of people trying to flee the country could soar in a crisis. It’s also an economic and environmental black hole that limits trade and travel throughout Northeast Asia.” Further, as foreign policy analyst Max Fisher observes, “The country’s greatest threat is not American power but South Korea’s prosperity. Pyongyang’s official ideology of race-based nationalism requires describing the Korean people as one nation, temporarily divided. But South Korea’s stronger economy and freer society leave the Pyongyang government with little reason to exist. Ending hostilities would risk a German-style reunification that would subsume the North under South Korean rule. Only a perpetual state of near-war can stave off reunification while justifying the North Korean state. And only nuclear-armed missiles can make that standoff survivable.” In other words, the primary motive behind North Korea’s nuclear and missile program is survival. Without these, North Korea has no reason to exist. So, Kim Jong-un will starve his people, keep them in a state of Third-world development and sacrifice everything else to attain nuclear weapons and ICBMs to deliver them. Survival of his totalitarian regime is the supreme mandate for Kim Jong-un.
- Second, despite such economic weakness, North Korea seems able to dictate terms to the world’s most powerful nation, the United States. How can it do this? North Korea seems to have achieved a nuclear deterrent unimaginable only a few years ago. Obviously, any military conflict with the US would result in a rapid defeat, but North

Korea could impose unacceptable costs on South Korea, Japan and potentially the US. In any such conflict, the US must be willing to sacrifice thousands of American lives and far more South Korean lives. North Korea has positioned as many as 8,000 artillery cannons and rocket launchers on its side of the Demilitarized Zone, an arsenal capable of “raining up to 300,000 rounds on the South in the first hour of counterattack. That means it can inflict tremendous damage without resorting to weapons of mass destruction.” Such a barrage would result in at least 3,000 fatalities at military facilities and 30,000 civilians immediately. If North Korea chose to use its nuclear weapons, the fatalities would be unimaginable. Over 10 million people around the capital city of Seoul, South Korea would be exposed. The Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (THAAD), recently installed by the US in South Korea could intercept some of the ICBMs but not all of them. So, the cost in lives lost would be catastrophic!

- Third, what are the viable options for the US? David Sanger of the *New York Times* concludes that there are four basic options:
 1. Classic containment is what the US has followed with Russia, China, Cuba, etc. But this does not solve the problem or the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear program and its ICBMs.
 2. The US could step up economic sanctions, bolster US naval presence off the Korean Peninsula and accelerate the secret American cyber-program to sabotage missile launches. But the US is already doing these and they do not seem to be preventing or slowing North Korean progress on nuclear weapons development or ICBM development.
 3. The US could threaten pre-emptive military strikes now or when there appears to be an imminent threat of an ICBM launch. But as the previous paragraph has argued, the resulting devastation and loss of life in South Korea must be a part of serious consideration for this option. Furthermore, because North Korea has developed solid-fuel missiles that can be easily hidden in caves and rolled out for quick launch, it is doubtful that the US could eliminate the total nuclear threat quickly.
 4. Negotiating with North Korea is another option but this has been pursued since the presidency of Bill Clinton and has not been terribly successful. Since North Korea already has between 10 and 20 nuclear weapons, the end result of negotiations would be the acknowledgment that a nuclear North Korea is here to stay. Any possible agreement with North Korea on the nuclear issue would require that the US take steps away from the Korean Peninsula, including its current military presence in the South along the DMZ and the removal of those troops and the cessation of all military exercises with the South. It is doubtful that the US would agree with this. The bottom line for the US is its willingness to accept an ICBM-armed North Korea, which would be the product of negotiations. It is rather clear now that Kim Jong-un

will not surrender his nuclear capability, which is the bedrock issue for the survival of his state in the first place.

Obviously, that the world community has refused to deal with the growing nuclear threat and ICBM capability of North Korea has produced this no-win situation for the United States. There is no good option for the US. It is reasonable to assume that a crisis is imminent in the Korean Peninsula. It is difficult to view this optimistically or positively. President Trump had hoped that China would reign in its rogue ally in North Korea, but as Charles Krauthammer has argued, "Their real interest is cutting America down to size by breaking our South Korean alliance and weakening our influence in the Pacific Rim." China will not help the US!

As a Christian, I believe in the sovereignty and providence of God (e.g., Daniel 4:17, 25). Kim Jong-un is no threat to our God. His actions and designs are not a surprise to the LORD. For now it is impossible to answer the question as to why God is permitting the North Korean regime to develop these types of mass destructive weapons and delivery systems. For that reason our trust must be in Him and in His providence and goodness. Kim Jong-un manifests in the extreme the human rebellion against God and His rule. Kim Jong-un will not succeed in his rebellion. Therefore, we who know the LORD must trust Him, pray for our leaders and believe that ultimately God will triumph and accomplish the purposes He has for this crisis on the Korean Peninsula.

See Motoko Rich, "In North Korea, 'Surgical Strike' Could Spin Into 'Worst Kind of Fighting'" in the *New York Times* (6 July 2017); Max Fisher in the *New York Times* (8 July 2017); David Sanger in the *New York Times* (5 July 2017); Charles Krauthammer in the *Omaha World Herald* (9 July 2017); and David C. Kang in the *New York Times* (6 July 2017).