



North Korea

Summary and Key Talking Points

Policy Proposals

1. Push for a comprehensive road map to denuclearization and insist on robust verification measures.
2. Enhance implementation of sanctions against entities that are in violation of U.N. declarations or U.S. legislation and regulations.
3. End unilateral U.S. disarmament by resuming military exercises with South Korea.
4. Uphold human rights principles by enforcing the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act.

Quick Facts

1. Pyongyang has a 1.1 million-man army, 70 percent of which is deployed within 60 miles of North Korea's border with South Korea.
2. North Korea spends an estimated 25 percent of its gross national product on its military.
3. Since 2017, in addition to parading a multiple-warhead ICBM, North Korea has successfully tested a hydrogen bomb, two ICBMs capable of threatening the American homeland, and 14 new missile systems capable of targeting South Korea and U.S. forces stationed there.
4. During a crisis, Pyongyang's cyber warfare could have a massive impact on financial, infrastructure, transportation, military, and government computer networks.

Power Phrases

A Regional and Global Danger

- In addition to threatening peace and stability in Asia, North Korea represents one of the world's most dangerous threats to U.S. national security interests.

Catastrophic Capabilities

- Pyongyang has conducted six underground nuclear tests, including the test of a powerful hydrogen bomb at least 10 times the size of the atomic weapons used at the end of World War II.
- The regime has successfully tested road-mobile ICBMs, including a variant that could reach the entire continental United States.

Nuclear Dismantlement

- Since 2018, the U.S. and South Korea have unilaterally curtailed allied military exercises without gaining any reciprocal North Korean security or diplomatic concessions.
- Despite three U.S.–North Korea leader meetings, there has been no decrease in North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) arsenal or production capabilities; Pyongyang continues to augment its nuclear and missile arsenal.
- The primary U.S. objective must be North Korea’s complete, verifiable, and irreversible nuclear dismantlement as required by U.N. resolutions.

The Issue

North Korea poses one of the world’s most dangerous threats to U.S. national security interests. Pyongyang presents a multifaceted military threat to peace and stability in Asia as well as a global proliferation risk.

In January 2021, Kim Jong-un “set a goal of attaining an advanced capability for making a preemptive and retaliatory nuclear strike by [improving] the rate of precision good enough to strike and annihilate any strategic targets within a range of 15,000 kilometers with pinpoint accuracy.” Pyongyang has conducted six nuclear tests, including the test of a powerful hydrogen bomb 10 times the size of the atomic weapons used at the end of World War II. Leaked U.S. intelligence estimates indicate that the regime had between 30 and 60 nuclear weapons in 2017 with a capability to produce from seven through 12 more of these weapons annually.

The regime has successfully tested road-mobile ICBMs, including a variant that could reach the entire continental United States. In October 2020, Pyongyang paraded the world’s largest road-mobile ICBM. The regime subsequently announced that the missile would have multiple warheads. Combined with its recent ability to produce mobile ICBM launchers indigenously, this raises the possibility that North Korea might be able to overwhelm America’s missile defenses.

Despite three U.S.–North Korea leader meetings, there has been no decrease in North Korea’s weapons of mass destruction (WMD) arsenal or production capabilities. The U.S. Intelligence Community has assessed that Pyongyang has increased its production of fissile material for nuclear weapons, and satellite imagery has revealed upgrades to missile, reentry vehicle, missile launcher, and nuclear weapon production facilities. The Intelligence Community continues to assess that North Korea is not likely to give up all of its WMD stockpiles, delivery systems, and production capabilities.

North Korea’s conventional forces also threaten U.S. bases in South Korea, Japan, and Guam. Pyongyang has deployed hundreds of short-range, medium-range, and intermediate-range missiles that can threaten all of Japan and South Korea as well as U.S. bases on Okinawa and Guam. Since 2019, North Korea has tested 14 new missile systems that can target South Korea and U.S. forces stationed there more effectively.

North Korea has approximately 1 million people in its military and several million more in its reserves. Pyongyang has forward deployed 70 percent of its ground forces within 90 miles of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), making it possible to attack with little or no warning. This is of particular concern because South Korea’s capital, Seoul, is only 30 miles south of the DMZ. North Korea’s armed forces, with their forward-deployed, offensively oriented disposition, and the regime’s history of making threats and initiating hostilities pose the greatest danger of armed conflict. In addition, confidence-building measures that have been implemented to date have not reduced the North Korean tactical or strategic conventional military threat to South Korea, nor do they represent progress in denuclearization.

Recommendations

Impose conditionality on future summit meetings. Initial U.S.–North Korean summits occurred without suitable preparation or requirements for progress toward an agreement. Despite fanfare and claims of success, the three meetings provided only the illusion of success. Subsequent summits should be reserved for formalizing an agreement worked out by diplomats or in-depth leader negotiations based on meticulous and well-planned policy positions.

Maintain the focus on denuclearization. The primary U.S. objective for the summit must be North Korea's complete, verifiable, and irreversible nuclear dismantlement as required by U.N. resolutions. Washington should not go down the rabbit hole of offering economic concessions to prove lack of U.S. hostility or induce North Korea to return to the negotiating table. It is not the U.S. and South Korea that have repeatedly violated U.N. resolutions, conducted deadly military attacks, and habitually threatened the governments and populations of rival nations.

Push for a comprehensive road map to denuclearization. With U.S.–North Korean negotiations in abeyance, the Biden Administration should resist entreaties to lower the bar to achieve progress. Any agreement must include a complete North Korean data declaration of its nuclear and missile programs as well as an unambiguous and public North Korean commitment to the U.N. requirement to abandon its nuclear and missile production capabilities and existing arsenals in a complete, verifiable, and irreversible manner.

Insist on robust verification measures. U.S. negotiators must emulate the robust and intrusive verification regime of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty, and Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty. Pyongyang should pledge compliance with U.N. resolutions, the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards. Verification provisions must include a data declaration of all production, fabrication, test, and storage facilities; the stockpile of fissile material, nuclear weapons, and missiles; on-site inspections of declared facilities; and short-notice challenge inspections of non-declared facilities. Any new agreement with North Korea that lacks such critically important protocols is a bad deal.

Condition a peace agreement on reducing the conventional force threat. The U.S. and South Korea should not sign a peace treaty until the North Korean nuclear threat is eliminated and the conventional threat is reduced. Conventional forces should be capped and then weaned away from the forward area using measures similar to those in the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty and the accompanying Vienna Document of Confidence and Security Building Measures. Signing a simplistic peace declaration would provide a false perception of peace while creating societal and legislative momentum for reducing or removing U.S. forces before reducing the North Korean threat that necessitated American involvement in the first place.

Fully enforce U.S. laws. Sanctions are a critical component of U.S. foreign policy. They uphold America's laws and defend its financial system—but only if they are implemented. The U.S. should sanction the 300 North Korean entities that are violating U.S. laws and against which it has deferred action, penalize Chinese banks that are engaged in money laundering and other crimes by identifying them as primary money-laundering concerns or imposing significant fines, impose sanctions against Chinese shipping companies that are flouting U.N. restrictions on North Korean oil, and impose secondary sanctions against ports that are aiding North Korea's smuggling of goods that are prohibited by U.N. sanctions.

End unilateral U.S. disarmament by resuming military exercises. The 2018 U.S. decision to cancel U.S.–South Korean military exercises was a major unilateral concession for which the United States received nothing in return. Pyongyang neither codified its missile and nuclear test moratorium in the Singapore communiqué nor announced reciprocal constraints on its own military exercises. The continued lack of a full schedule of exercises is degrading U.S. and South Korean deterrence and defense capabilities. The exercises

are necessary to ensure both the interoperability and integration of allied military operations and the readiness to respond to North Korean attacks. Washington and Seoul should announce a return to the previous level of exercises.

Uphold human rights principles by enforcing the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act. The U.S. should make human rights an integral component of U.S. policy. Downplaying North Korean human rights violations to gain diplomatic progress is antithetical to U.S. values, undermines the diplomatic isolation of North Korea, and sets a poor precedent for negotiations.

Facts + Figures

FACT: North Korea’s nuclear, missile, and conventional forces are a formidable threat to the United States and its allies in northeast Asia.

- North Korea has steadily improved the quality and quantity of its nuclear and missile arsenals. After assuming power, Kim Jong-un oversaw an expansive diversification of North Korea’s arsenal and accelerated nuclear and missile testing. New weapons overcame the shortcomings of their predecessors and now pose a far greater threat to allied forces and missile defense systems.
- North Korea is producing a new generation of advanced mobile missiles that, in addition to being more accurate, more mobile, and more difficult to detect and target, have an enhanced ability to evade allied missile defenses.
- The U.S. Intelligence Community has estimated that in 2017, North Korea had produced 30–60 nuclear warheads or weapons’ worth of fissile material with the capacity to create seven–12 warheads per year. The regime has successfully tested a hydrogen (thermonuclear) weapon at least 10 times as powerful as the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs.
- Pyongyang has practiced missile launches under wartime conditions by firing multiple missiles from numerous locations throughout the country, simulated nuclear airburst attacks over South Korea and Japan, and conducted salvo launches of several missiles simultaneously.

FACT: North Korea is one of the greatest cyber threats to the United States, its allies, and the international financial system.

- Pyongyang has developed a comprehensive and sophisticated arsenal of cyberattack tools and methods. The Director of National Intelligence warned in January 2019 that North Korea “poses a significant cyber threat to financial institutions, remains a cyber-espionage threat, and retains the ability to conduct disruptive cyber attacks.”
- North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has declared that cyber warfare is a “magic weapon” and an “all-purpose sword that guarantees the North Korean People’s Armed Forces ruthless striking capability, along with nuclear weapons and missiles.”
- North Korea has conducted cyber guerrilla warfare to steal classified military secrets, absconded with billions of dollars in money and cryptocurrency, held computer systems hostage, and inflicted extensive damage on computer networks.
- In August 2019, the U.N. Panel of Experts estimated that North Korea had cumulatively gained \$2 billion from cybercrime. Some experts now assess that Pyongyang may gain \$1 billion a year—a third of the value of the nation’s exports—from cyber heists.
- North Korea has proven to be adept at deeply penetrating even highly secure computer networks of governments, militaries, banks and international financial transaction systems, and critical infrastructure targets. During a crisis, Pyongyang’s cyber warfare could have a massive impact on financial, infrastructure, transportation, military, and government computer networks.

FACT: During the past four years, the U.S. and South Korea have unilaterally curtailed allied military exercises while gaining no reciprocal North Korean security or diplomatic concessions.

- Allied military exercises were curtailed initially because of President Trump's promise to cancel large-scale allied military exercises in return for Kim's promise to refrain from nuclear and ICBM tests—a poor deal given that 11 U.N. resolutions prohibit North Korea from conducting nuclear or any missile launch regardless of range. More recently, COVID restrictions have also prevented a resumption of large-scale exercises. For a variety of reasons, under President Biden, exercises have not yet returned to their formal levels.
- The U.S. and South Korea can no longer conduct close air support of allied ground force exercises in frontline areas because of new restrictions in the 2018 inter-Korean military agreement.
- For several years, the U.S. has not flown strategic bombers near the Korean Peninsula and has had to hold ground force regimental drills outside of South Korea.
- South Korean K-9 artillery on Yeonpyeong Island must now move to the peninsula to train, but North Korean 4th Corps artillery, which attacked Yeonpyeong Island in 2010 killing four South Koreans, is not affected by the inter-Korean military agreement.
- Under the inter-Korean military agreement, South Korea closed the only long-range artillery practice range in Gangwon province. Practice with the Chungmoo MRL and K-9 self-propelled artillery howitzer at the range had included live-fire exercises every year in April and November.
- The unilateral U.S. concession on curtailing military training exercises did not lead to any progress in denuclearization talks and risked degrading allied deterrence and defense capabilities. North Korea continues its military training exercises, including the large-scale Winter Training Cycle, and has conducted more than 40 missile tests during the past three years.

Additional Resources

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