

Why the Kim regime actually needs nuclear weapons by Byran Port

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Efforts to bring about the complete, irreversible, verifiable denuclearization (CVID) of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) have used a mix of engagement and pressure. This approach falls short of a strategy, and fails to consider and address the three drivers – external threats (perceived and real), domestic politics, and internal control – behind the Kim Jong Un regime's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Achieving CVID requires that we take concerted action against all three. However, doing so also comes with an increased risk of prompting DPRK aggression, instability, and complete collapse.

In all likelihood, CVID will require a different regime in the DPRK. This does not have to be pursued immediately or primarily through military power. Other methods can be employed, primarily political, informational, and economic instruments; together they are a potent alternative to preventive war even if requiring more time, will, and resources. North Korea presents a severe, but not imminent threat. There is time to design and implement a strategy based on a CVID end state that employs political, informational, and economic methodology directed against the three drivers, while also taking measures to ensure the US and its allies prevail in conflict, instability, or collapse.

The first driver – North Korea's need, perceived or real, for deterrence and defense against external threats, as well as coercive diplomacy – dominates the attention of policy-makers in the United States, South Korea, China, Japan, and elsewhere. It is widely believed that North Korea conducts a nuclear or missile test at a given time to shape the policies and actions of its neighbors and interlocutors. Other explanations include North Korean efforts to drive a wedge between these nations, or obtaining aid and concessions. These are all likely – and perhaps even dominant, at times – elements in Kim's decision-making. This driver is the least important among the three, however. It is also the easiest to address, as it is the only one with a primarily external nexus.

The second driver – internal North Korean politics and perceptions – is likely the core factor. North Korea's foundational ideology plays a role in the pursuit of WMD. The regime has few other ways to demonstrate its proclaimed

inherent ethnic and national superiority, particularly considering the penetration of external information and the populace's increasing understanding of North Korea's status compared to other nations. The regime cannot compete with the outside world on the basis of international norms and economics and hence needs external enemies and existential threats to maintain internal cohesion among the elites and public. Additionally, the regime needs to ensure elite cohesion and confidence to keep the system together, to show that it can counter both external and internal threats. WMD is essential to the regime's ability to demonstrate that it can provide security against external forces, as well as maintain the power and privilege of North Korea's elites.

The third driver centers on the political and economic necessities of maintaining internal patronage networks and elite cohesion. This is more than perception and politics: it transforms WMD programs into an instrument that provides a material dimension to the second driver. The regime uses WMD programs to operate patronage networks that build crucial dependencies by key sectors of elites, and serve as a form of positive control through the provision of benefits and status. These networks also enable close surveillance and scrutiny of key elements of the population, as well as physical control for those working at particularly sensitive facilities on crucial national security projects.

Achieving CVID requires that we address all three drivers. Tackling one or more can yield strategic benefits, however, even if does not deliver CVID. Addressing the first driver, North Korea's external threat perceptions, can lower the prospects for rapid crisis escalation and proliferation while increasing the potential to de-escalate clashes if they occur. Having addressed the Kim regime's external threat perceptions, Kim is more likely to cap and freeze his nuclear program. This may be difficult for other nations to accept, particularly the United States. However, as an interim objective, this approach has significant strategic merit, including the creation of decision-space for other methods to be employed toward the ultimate objective – provided that a freeze does not require inappropriate or asymmetric compromises by the US.

Addressing the first driver may be the only option unless we are willing to put regime change in play, or at least take measures that impose internal political dilemmas and costs on the Kim government. That, however, risks instability and conflict. Regime change does not have to be pursued immediately or through military means, although military preparation is critical to mitigate the risks of North Korean aggression in response to such initiatives. A potent combination of fear, self-interest, and a genuine sense of ethno-nationalism has unified North Korea's elites behind Kim Jong Un. But the nature of the regime and North Korea's geostrategic circumstances place the elite in a situation in

which they are focused on avoiding losses, and have no compelling reasons to take decisions and actions that are neutral or favor US or ROK interests. The US and ROK have to give those elites reason and hope that that their lot in life will improve in a post-Kim North Korea or a unified peninsula, contingent on specific things they do or refrain from doing.

We are unlikely to convince the most senior elites, including Kim Jong Un, that there are positive alternative futures that don't involve nuclear weapons. However, elites below the top tier may be open and responsive to other futures, particularly if they only require choices to not pursue certain career fields or courses of action, or otherwise only engage in passive forms of resistance in the near-term. This approach will not lead to near-term denuclearization, but may be a critical component of a longer-term effort to achieve denuclearization with the lowest, but still considerable, costs and risks. This approach is a realistic and viable alternative to critical but insufficient diplomatic efforts and preventive war.

There are many ways to support a political-informational approach against the second and third factors, but this is a subject for another article. The main point here is that CVID requires action against all three drivers behind the North Korean WMD program and sanctions and engagement are not optimized to affect the second and third drivers.

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