



Trump Administration's Approach to the North Korean Nuclear and Missile Threats

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The Trump administration intends to robustly respond to the “immediate” missile and nuclear threat from North Korea. Its strategy will be, to a large extent, a continuation of previous policy. A new element, though, is pressure on China to take full advantage of its leverage over Kim Jong Un’s regime. Growing tensions on the Korean Peninsula could have significant implications on the relationship between the U.S. and its European allies.

Growing Threat from North Korea. Under Kim Jong Un, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has advanced its nuclear arsenal. Since 2013, it has conducted three of its five nuclear tests in total, including two in 2016 alone that helped it move towards more sophisticated, smaller and lighter warheads. Even if the claims of successful thermonuclear warhead test in January 2016 are doubted, it should be seen as an indicator of the country’s ambitions. It is estimated that the DPRK has enough fissile material to build as many as 20 warheads if limited to just its Yongbyon facility, which has a reactor that can produce plutonium and centrifuges for uranium enrichment. However, South Korean intelligence estimates that the DPRK has at least one more facility for uranium enrichment and has already produced enough plutonium and uranium for even 46–60 warheads.

The DPRK is equally advanced in building up its ballistic missile arsenal, which might deliver nuclear warheads. Unprecedented also is the intensification of exercises with older types of missiles and tests of new builds. During 2011–2016, the DPRK fired 42 missiles, many more than during the 15-year-rule of Un’s father, Kim Jong Il. Further tests in 2017 suggest a continuation of this tempo and scale of tests. Older, short-range Scud ballistic missiles have been succeeded by the more advanced Toksa missile, both capable of targeting all South Korea. The DPRK’s Nodong missiles (1,300 km range) can target the territory of Japan while the intensively tested Musudan missiles (4,000 km) can target Guam, home to important U.S. military bases. The DPRK is also working on intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). The tested Unha-3 space launch vehicle might be converted into a missile with a range of targets, including Hawaii and Alaska; however, this rocket platform is more for testing multi-stage builds and re-entry vehicles for warheads. More concerning to the U.S. are subsequent versions of the Hwasong-13 ICBM, but there is no unclassified estimate of the timeframe for their initial operational capability.

The DPRK’s advanced missiles are harder to detect and destroy. First and foremost, the DPRK is working on solid-fuel engines, which increase combat readiness. Hwasong-13 and Pukgongsong-2 missiles can be fired from mobile launchers, while the Pukgongsong-1 is submarine-launched. Even if the *Sohae*-class submarine that was built in 2014 has only one launcher and is easy to detect, it creates additional nuclear strike options. The DPRK is also mastering its attack methods, demonstrated by the simultaneous launch of four missiles in March of 2017.

The End of “Strategic Patience.” The new U.S. administration has described the DPRK’s nuclear and missile threat as “imminent” and “alarming.” During Secretary of State Rex Tillerson’s visit to the region in March

2017, he highlighted the end of the U.S. policy of “strategic patience,” which encompassed growing pressure on the DPRK with the expectation that Pyongyang would de-nuclearise.

Within the “strategic patience” framework, the U.S. sought to strengthen international sanctions on the DPRK, imposed since 2006. The most recent related UN Security Council Resolution (2321 from November 2016) not only expanded the existing sanctions but also introduced new ones. Notably, the resolution limited yearly imports of coal from the DPRK by United Nations members to about \$401 million or 7.5 million metric tonnes (whichever came first). As a result, on 18 February 2017, China announced its suspension of coal imports from the DPRK. This is greatly important since coal exports to China are the main source of revenue to the DPRK. In 2016, it sold China about 22.5 metric tonnes worth about \$1.1 billion.

In addition to the new sanctions, it is probable that since 2014 the U.S. has intensified its attempts to sabotage of DPRK missile tests through cyberattacks and electronic warfare. The U.S. also reconfirmed its security guarantees toward South Korea and Japan. It has deepened consultations with these allies and demonstrated its commitment to come to their defence through a variety of actions, including the “Key Resolve” / “Foal Eagle” regular military exercises; strategic bomber overflights over South Korean territory in response to DPRK provocations; and, a new agreement on the rotational deployment of U.S. strategic assets to the Republic of Korea (bombers, submarines, aircraft carrier). The U.S. also has augmented missile defence in the region, including accelerating the deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system to South Korea on 6 March 2017.

Trump Administration Options. The U.S. National Security Council has concluded a strategic review of policy towards the DPRK that took into account a broad spectrum of options. Among them, military options were assessed (including pre-emptive strikes) as well as more military assistance to South Korea and Japan. The White House also analysed options for stronger multilateral UN sanctions and unilateral U.S. sanctions. Initially, the option of a U.S.-DPRK dialogue was considered.

Despite the harsh rhetoric, most likely the U.S. will continue the policy of previous administrations. Pre-emptive strikes on targets in the DPRK are considered last resort measures. The renewal of dialogue is still conditioned on clear steps by the DPRK towards de-nuclearisation. The Americans’ priority seems to be increasing diplomatic and economic pressure on the DPRK.

The new dimension of the U.S. strategy is tied to a greater emphasis on strengthened sanctions and their strict implementation by China. Despite the declared halt to coal imports from the DPRK, the lack of implementation of previous sanctions by China weakened their effectiveness. According to Trump, China was not using its influence over the DPRK, which was not very helpful to the U.S. It is clear that encouraging China to cooperate on this issue will be high on the agenda of the Trump-Xi Jinping summit on 6–7 April 2017. The Americans might also try to use economic leverage over China, including introducing sanctions on Chinese entities doing business in the DPRK. They may also stress that the continuation of the DPRK’s nuclear and missile programmes will require more integrated U.S. missile defence and offensive capabilities in the region, which China strongly opposes.

Implications for Transatlantic Relations. If North Korea gains operational capability to strike the territory of the continental United States, that would pose a direct threat to the North Atlantic Area covered by Article 5 of the Washington Treaty. Europe would also be in range of such missiles. It cannot be excluded that Iran would take advantage of technologies developed by North Korea to further increase its missile threat to Europe. Another scenario that cannot be discounted is that the U.S. strategy towards the DPRK would lead to tension in transatlantic relations—if the U.S. increases pressure on China, it will expect its European allies to follow. Some NATO members, including Poland, will face the dilemma of whether to support the U.S. or risk worsening relations—especially economic—with China. An unexpected crisis on the Korean Peninsula may decrease U.S. focus on European security and lead to questions about European support. Poland and other European countries should be prepared for the U.S. to seek to coordinate policy toward the growing North Korean threat, either within NATO or through the EU.