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Changed Regime: A Policy to Resolve the North Korean Nuclear Crisis **5**

James M. Minnich

Power Shift? Eine Kritik geopolitischen Denkens über Ostasien **9**

Christian Wirth

Mythen militärischer Führung **26**

Bruno Staffelbach

Kaderselektion als Mittel zur Gestaltung der Führungskultur **36**

Hubert Annen

Gedanken von Carl von Clausewitz zum komplexen und dynamischen Phänomen «Krieg» **50**

Matthias Kuster

Letale autonome Waffensysteme – Fluch oder Segen? **60**

Martin Krummenacher

Strategische Rohstoffe: Europas Rohstoffvorsorge und -sicherheit in der Neubewertung **72**

Stefan Nitschke

Changed Regime: A Policy to Resolve the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

The North Korean threat is genuinely bad, and likely to worsen, unless the governments of the United States and the Republic of Korea (South Korea) collectively embrace a policy of changed regime toward the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (North Korea), now! That is right, not a policy of regime change, which is being reckless promulgated by pundits and politicians as a plausible panacea to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, but a policy of changed regime. What is the difference between these two policies? Regime change substitutes one dictator for another; and Kim Jong-un is the country's third – a fourth will likely be no better, and possibly worse. Changed regime is a policy of consistent, prolonged engagement that engenders a transformation from within by resolute exposures from without.

James M. Minnich¹

How bad is it?

North Korea is estimated to have at least 20 nuclear warheads and a minimal capacity to manufacture enough uranium-235 to increase its warhead stocks at a rate of two per annum. North Korea's nuclear warhead growth is not static; it is increasing, as is its ballistic missile delivery capabilities and capacity. In the past two years, Pyongyang has successfully demonstrated its extant nuclear weapons deliver platforms. SCUD short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM), which can range all of Korea, and Nodong medium-range ballistic missiles (MRBM), which can range Japan, are the North's most reliable ballistic missiles and have been successfully tested more than 30 times since Kim Jong-un assumed power. In February 2016, Pyongyang validated its missile stage separation technology with a successful space launch. The North later proved a burgeoning second-strike nuclear weapons capability with an August 2016 sea-based test of Pukuksong-1, a submarine-launched ballistic missile; and the February 2017 firing of Pukuksong-2, a road mobile MRBM platform. Musudan, a road mobile intermediate range ballistic missile (IRBM) was also tested successfully in mid-2016 and can range U.S. forces in Guam; as can the North's solid fuel, road mobile Hwasong-12/KN-17 IRBM that was twice tested successfully in 2017. Then in July 2017, Pyongyang succeeded in twice testing its Hwasong-14/KN-20 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), which is capable of ranging all but the eastern seaboard of the American homeland. In September 2017, Pyongyang conducted its sixth nuclear weapons test, demonstrating a thermonu-

clear weapon's capability. Demonstrating a nuclear airburst over the Pacific Ocean now seems to be Pyongyang's next move, as intimated in September 2017 by North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho. Targeting North Korean ballistic missiles is complicated by its development of solid fuel, mobile platforms, as well as the sheer number of its systems, which include some 600 SRBMs, 200 MRBMs, 50 IRBMs, and an increasing number of ICBMs.

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What is at risk?

Disquietingly, Washington risks much more than a near future where North Korea credibly threatens nuclear attack upon the American homeland and its forward deployed forces in South Korea, Japan, Guam, Hawaii, and Alaska. At stake, is the potential for America to undertake a preventive war to decapitate the North Korean regime and to destroy its nuclear facilities; irrespective of the North's probable retaliation, which could inflict mayhem, casualties, and destruction in the region. Moreover, in the end, a preventive strike is unlikely to eliminate a hostile North Korea. The mere possibility that Washington might initiate a preventive war erodes American rela-

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not the official policy or position of the United States Government or the Department of Defense.



Figure 1 Launch preparation for the Hwasong-14 on 28 July 2017 (KCNA)



Figure 2 Summit meeting of Presidents Trump and Moon at the White House in May 2017 (Carlos Barria@Reuters)



Figure 3 U.S./ROK «extended deterrence» operated over the Korean Airspace (SSG Steven Schneider@US Army)

tions with China and Russia, as does pressure on Beijing to «resolve» the North Korean threat. Washington's alliances with Seoul and Tokyo are strained under the constant weight of a North Korean nuclear threat. South Ko-

rean President Moon Jae-in entered office in May 2017 with a mandate to renew the «Sunshine Policy» of previous liberal administrations and to walk back the nuclear threat through inter-Korean engagements. If Washington continues a hawkish policy toward Pyongyang, it may approach loggerheads with Seoul, which is reminiscent of acrimonious relations between former presidents George W. Bush and Roh Moo-hyun. Dishearteningly, other U.S. interests are at risk by not resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis. Conservative elements of Seoul advocate for either a reintroduction of U.S. nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, or the domestic development of a South Korean nuclear bomb. The latter option would certainly weaken the international Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and could presage even broader proliferation in Northeast Asia.

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What is to be done?

Kim Jong-un is 33. If Kim lives to his grandfather's age, he will govern until 2066. This could be advantageous, as a policy of changed regime will require consistent, prolonged engagement with continuous leadership and objectives. Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang are the only three relevant parties to a future agreement, and should refrain from outsourcing diplomacy to China, Japan, and Russia, whose interests are not Washington's interests in this matter, and will therefore be inadequate in achieving a positive solution. Notwithstanding, Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow will be beneficiaries to an agreement, and could serve as benefactors; as with the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework. If Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang cooperatively choose this preferable path, it should avoid past pitfalls by quelling ardent pretensions to resolve all ills from the outset.

Security guarantees

The vital interest for all parties, for that matter all states, is to eliminate national security threats – explicit and implicit. Trepidations of insecurity propel Pyongyang in its pursuit of nuclear weapons. Therefore, if denuclearization is to be realized, Pyongyang's national security must be guaranteed. Pyongyang will not in good faith accept offers of incentives as pretext to denuclearization. Pyongyang views denuclearization, without an ironclad security guarantee, as capitulation. It is a non-starter, and the core failure of earlier denuclearization efforts: the 1991 Inter-Korean agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Cooperation, and Exchange, and its companion agreement the Joint Declaration on Denuclearization; the 1994 U.S.-DPRK Agreed Framework; the 2005 Six Party Talk's Joint Declaration; and the 2012 U.S.-DPRK Leap Day Deal.

Trilateral security guarantees between Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang will necessitate mutual repudiation of armed aggression against the other. Words alone will be ineffective; so, actions will be essential. A focal failure, as



Figure 4 The last Senior Officers Talks so far at Panmunjeom on 11 September 2013 (UNCMAC)

perceived by Pyongyang, of the December 1991 inter-Korean agreements, was Seoul's continuation of large-scale, military exercises that force-flowed American armed forces to the peninsula, where a combined force of 200,000 combatants conducted force-on-force theater-level operations. Washington and Seoul simply cannot have it both ways. That is, Pyongyang's assent to eliminate its nuclear weapons and strategic missiles, while the U.S.-ROK alliance prepares to defeat a North Korean threat. To reset this three-quarter century tripartite inimicality, substantive and credible security guarantees must be proffered.

Changed Regime Policy

While indefatigable security guarantees are foremost to a policy of changed regime, the parties must also embark on distributed parallel pursuits that normalize political and economic relations; abate and abolish Pyongyang's nuclear weapons, and nuclear weapons program; provide non-nuclear energy sources; and promote cooperative prosperity. Normalization of political and economic relations would immediately precede the exchange of capital liaison offices in Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang; these would be upgraded to embassies within 12 months. Diplomatic offices would be conduits to government negotiations and implementation of agreement protocols, threat reductions, confidence building measures, economic partnerships, sports and cultural exchanges, remains recoveries and repatriations, inter-Korean family reunions, and more.

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Abatement and abolishment of North Korea's nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons programs are phased approaches to nuclear disarmament; And while abatement would precede abolishment, it should not be the first of cascading tripartite agreements, as Pyongyang fears being duped into vulnerability. At this point, abolishment of North Korea's nuclear weapons could be a decade's endeavor as Pyongyang will need to be convinced of no lingering hostilities toward it by Washington and Seoul. The abolishment of North Korea's nuclear weapons and nuclear weapons programs will necessitate inspection protocols to confirm compliance, trust will be requisite to span suspicion's chasm of Pyongyang's conformity. Absent trust, pernicious doubts of clandestine capabilities will endlessly deteriorate progress, risking another failed agreement.

Provision of non-nuclear energy will be necessary to compensate North Korea's abandonment of nuclear energy, irrespective of its latency. Coal and hydropower are preponderant sources of North Korea's electricity production and should form the basis of a transfer agreement that in-

cludes building and repairing power grids and stations, and developing and repairing coal extraction and storage capabilities and capacities. Energy development and distribution will improve all aspects of North Korea and its people.

Promotion of cooperative prosperity is an essential element to affect North Korea's teleological transmogrification from its insular seclusion and circumscribed production competencies. Expansion of North Korea's extant and planned joint economic zones and mining industry offers favorable areas to begin cooperative ventures. Cooperative projects need not be doles. North Korea has significant latent comparative advantages in low-cost labor, vast deposits of mineral resources, and tourism; to enumerate a few.

Decades' long mutual enmity will necessitate prolonged peaceful coexistence to establish permissive conditions for a peace agreement to take hold.

A policy of *changed regime*, thus implemented, would be a peace regime policy, which could evolve overtime to a peace agreement. While appropriately aspirational, a negotiated peace agreement remains illusory until the two Koreas are willing to exchange their armed demilitarized zone with an unarmed land border, and refer overlapping territorial sea disputes before the international arbitral tribunal. Decades' long mutual enmity will necessitate prolonged peaceful coexistence to establish permissive conditions for a peace agreement to take hold.

The Korean peninsula is again embroiled in crisis, and while tempting to dismiss it as cyclic, it is not. Today's crisis stands singular in severity over more than 25-years that Washington and Seoul have sought to resolve the North Korean nuclear threat. Crisis is part risk, part opportunity. The greater risk can yield the greater opportunity; therefore the present opportunity to advance a policy of changed regime must be seized now before either it is spent, or risk yields way to miscalculation and miscalculation to devastation.



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