

North Korea's Nuclear Quest

Written by Francis Grice

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FRANCIS GRICE, SEP 14 2017

September began with an incredibly disturbing and yet wholly predictable turn of events in East Asia – North Korea successfully tested a new nuclear bomb and, by all accounts, it was larger than any it had tested before. While the speed with which it has developed its nuclear program has caught a lot of analysts off-guard, the fact that Kim Jong-un has so doggedly pursued the acquisition of a nuclear deterrent has been viewed as less surprising. Nevertheless, much of the current news and academic coverage about why Kim has proceeded down this path at all oversimplifies his rationale. This is important to rectify because understanding Kim's reasoning is essential for finding a workable solution to the current tension filled crisis that grips the region as a result of his actions.

Realists think that they fully understand his motivation and are trumpeting it from the rooftops: Kim feels spooked by the possibility of outside powers invading North Korea to bring about regime change. He must have watched with rapt horror as the West overthrew the governments in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya because they possessed tyrannical regimes who persecuted their people and threatened the West. Kim almost certainly concluded that his regime might be next and decided that enhancing his nuclear deterrent would be the only way to guarantee his survival. Consequently, he is now pursuing the rapid development of his nuclear program and would rather that the North Korean people “eat grass” from hyper-restrictive sanctions than abandon this path. The American response to all this has been to increase its Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in neighboring states, increase the alert status of its naval forces in the region, hold high-profile military exercises with South Korea, seek ever more restrictive economic and diplomatic sanctions, and use inflammatory rhetoric that promises “fire and fury.” This, in turn, has heightened Kim Jong-un's determination to acquire further nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, creating a kind of lopsided arms race.

To be fair to the realists, they are right. Yet their depictions only capture half of the story. Part of the reason why Kim has pursued his nuclear and ballistic missiles program is that it forms one of the central planks of his domestic policy platform. When Kim succeeded his father Kim Jong-il in late 2011, he also inherited his program of *Songun* or “Military First,” which emphasized the expansion of the North Korean military and its prioritization over the civilian population. This doctrine gave immense prestige and power to the armed forces and, when Kim Jong-un became leader, he became quickly concerned that their influence was ballooning out of control and could threaten his rule. His fears were likely compounded by reported outbreaks of fighting within the armed forces about whether or not they would bow their head to the young new ruler. In response, Kim threw out *Songun* and replaced it with a new program called *Byungjin* or “Parallel Development.”

Byungjin is a peculiar creation that involves the twin advancement of North Korea's economy and its nuclear program. The military is not formally downgraded, but nor does it receive special attention in the same way that it did under *Songun*. This absence implies that the armed forces are no longer the unchallenged favorite children of the regime but have been superseded by the party instead. The economic side of the program is intended to help bring about a rebalancing of power within the country, so that the military is no longer the paramount force behind the throne. The nuclear side is intended to placate the military about this radical shift by suggesting that it has not been downgraded in importance, but merely that the focus has changed from conventional to nuclear force. This allows Kim to continue being seen as a courageous leader and a military advocate, while also winding back the most dangerous elements of the armed forces from a domestic security point of view.

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This is a difficult feat and Kim cannot risk being seen as a militarily feeble leader while the transition from *Songun* to *Byungjin* is completed. His ability, therefore, to approach the current confrontation over its nuclear program with the United States in a conciliatory manner is actually quite limited. Kim feels that he must be seen by his own armed forces as a figure who is strong enough to stand up against the outside world. If he backs down or is seen to seek a compromise, he could end up being viewed as a coward or even a traitor to his father's legacy in the eyes of the military. This might increase the possibility of disenchanted officers considering a coup against him.

Adding to Kim's fears is his knowledge of the fate of former Soviet Premier, Nikita Khrushchev, who was deposed in an internal coup two years after appearing to back down in the face of American sabre rattling over the Cuban Missile Crisis. The perception that Khrushchev had been humiliated during the confrontation contributed in no small part to the decision of the plotters to move against him. The irony for Khrushchev was that he had in fact managed to wrangle significant concessions from the United States, including the removal of its nuclear missiles from Turkey, yet these gains were kept so secret that even the conspirators who overthrew him were unaware of them, and Khrushchev seemed both domestically and globally to have lost the face-off with President Kennedy.

Efforts by the United States to resolve the current crisis with North Korea must, therefore, take into account the fact that Kim is motivated by both internal and external security concerns, rather than simply the latter. It was noteworthy that during the spark in tensions that accompanied Kim's threats against Guam in August, the Trump administration reacted exactly the wrong way to Kim's decision to not attack the U.S. island territory at that time. By praising his restraint, President Trump made Kim look as though he had backed down, which risked making him seem weak at home. Kim's inability to accept that outcome may very well have helped to fuel his decision to reignite the situation by testing a new nuclear bomb soon afterwards. This allowed him to demonstrate to his domestic military audience that he had not really buckled in the face of foreign pressure, but had merely been moving indirectly towards an even greater and more important showdown.

The answer for the United States cannot be as simple as offering Kim concessions, however, as this would bring its own problems. First, previous efforts to trade technology and food to North Korea in trade for halting its nuclear program failed to achieve their goal because North Korea cheated and continued to develop its weapons regardless. If re-attempted, this could simply lead to a repetition of the cycle in which North Korea obtains new hand-outs in exchange for the same hollow promises of cessation that it has offered before, all while continuing to develop its nuclear capabilities at full tilt. Second, being seen to bribe a hostile state into halting its nuclear program with gifts of aid and technology would facilitate a nasty precedent that any state who wanted to extort similar benefits from the United States should pursue its own nuclear program to do so. Third, there is a hugely important humanitarian dimension that cannot be ignored: Kim is a horrifying totalitarian dictator and the United States should not countenance any solution that helps him to increase the level of suffering that he can inflict upon the North Korean people. It would be inappropriate, for example, for President Trump to offer to lift the sanctions that were imposed on North Korea in 2016 in response to its human rights abuses because these were specially targeted to undermine the ability of the regime to hurt its people.

If the United States truly wants to resolve the current crisis, therefore, it has to offer Kim a way out that not only soothes his external security fears, but also allows him to avoid losing face at home. At the same time, it must evade appearing to have succumbed to nuclear blackmail in the eyes of the North Korean leadership and the wider world, while also avoid helping to facilitate an increase in the abuse inflicted upon the North Korean population by its regime. It is going to be tricky to craft this solution exactly right, but it is a path that is far more desirable than the realist alternative of an ever-escalating arms race and war of words that could too easily result in nuclear weapons being used, intentionally or otherwise.

One option might be for President Trump to reach back out to Kim and invite him for the burger that he suggested in passing during the 2016 Presidential Election. The two leaders sitting down together for a meal, perhaps at a diner in picturesque Guam, would allow Kim to present himself back home as a leader of equal standing to the United States. This would be seen as no mean feat because no sitting president of the United States has ever before consented to meet with a North Korean leader. At the same time, however, this solution would preclude the need for the United States to offer Kim anything tangible that could be perceived as a bribe in North Korea or the wider world, or that

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could be used to intensify the suffering of the North Korean population. It would, however, allow the two leaders to engage in direct dialogue, which in turn could generate empathy and encourage them to resolve their present and future problems through conversation rather than hostile threats and actions.

The United States may not be able to force North Korea to abandon its nuclear and ballistic missiles program, but it can at least encourage them to communicate with the world using diplomacy instead of throwing nuclear tantrums. If Hamburger Diplomacy could help achieve that end, it would be a thoroughly worthwhile endeavor.

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