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NORTH KOREA:  
THE CASE FOR OFFSHORE BALANCING

by

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## **Biography**

Lieutenant Colonel Eric Rant is assigned to the Iowa Army National Guard as an Engineer Officer. In 2005, Rant deployed to Ramadi, Iraq with the 224th Engineer Battalion. Prior to attending the Air War College, LTC Rant commanded the 224<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion and worked as a plant general manager for a Fortune 250 paper and packaging company. Rant earned a Bachelor of Science in Mathematics from Lincoln University, a Master of Science in Engineering Management from the Missouri University of Science and Technology, and is currently pursuing a Doctor of Business Administration degree from St. Ambrose University.



## **Abstract**

Past diplomatic efforts and sanctions have failed to prevent the North Koreans from continuing their nuclear and missile ambitions. If diplomacy is the preferred method to solving this strategic challenge, then a new and unconventional diplomatic approach is in order. In this paper, I argue that the removal of U.S. ground forces from South Korea could be the catalyst to compel North Korea to denuclearize through a grand bargain while still maintaining regional stability and security. To support this, this paper will build on the structural realist perspective for the causes of North Korea's nuclear ambition and further provide insight into why previous diplomatic efforts have failed to deliver results. Additionally, this paper expands the concepts of offshore balancing to support the theoretical possibility of removing permanent U.S. forces in South Korea while still providing regional stability and security in the region. Finally, a negotiation framework is presented to outline how this diplomatic solution could potentially be achieved.

## Introduction

If the North Korean nuclear crisis will be solved diplomatically, it is time to start thinking differently. North Korea's nuclear and missile development program has quickly escalated and dominates the United States national security conversation. Secretary of Defense James Mattis recently stated that the growing nuclear and missile threat from North Korea is the most urgent national security threat we face today.<sup>1</sup> Given this real and present danger, a threat that has evolved over decades into the wicked problem we face today, a diplomatic solution has eluded multiple U.S. administrations. Although North Korea's incessant missile development program has increased tensions between North Korea and the United States, diplomacy still has a chance to work. Recently, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson claimed the President's preferred method to solving the North Korean nuclear issue is through diplomatic efforts. Tillerson further stated that the President is not seeking to go to war.<sup>2</sup> However, past diplomatic efforts and sanctions have failed to prevent the North Koreans from continuing their nuclear and missile ambitions.<sup>3</sup> Hence, if diplomacy is the preferred method to solving this strategic challenge, and considering diplomatic efforts over the past 20 plus years have failed to deter the North Koreans from achieving an intercontinental nuclear weapon capability, then a new and unconventional diplomatic approach is in order.

Would the phased removal of U.S. forces from South Korea lead to the denuclearization of North Korea? This question assumes the North Koreans are developing a nuclear program because of the security threat they perceive from the physical presence of U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula. Would the U.S. consider the removal of U.S. forces if it could create a nuclear-free Korean peninsula? As previously stated, the most urgent strategic threat facing the U.S. is the nuclear threat from North Korea, so this question is at least worth consideration.

However, the North Korean nuclear issue isn't the only factor to consider. The U.S. also has a strategic goal of maintaining U.S. influenced stability and security in the region, not only today but also into the future.<sup>4</sup> Conventional wisdom suggests that the U.S. presence in South Korea ensures stability in the region.<sup>5</sup> So, even if the removal of U.S. forces from South Korea could lead to the denuclearization of Korea, how could the U.S. continue to influence the region and ensure stability in Northeast Asia? Therefore the diplomatic problem to be solved is, how could the U.S. diplomatically achieve both a denuclearized North Korea and still maintain U.S. influence and regional stability in Northeast Asia? Without changing the basic nature and mission of U.S. forces in South Korea, the DPRK is not likely to stop developing its deterrent nuclear program.<sup>6</sup> As such, a U.S. diplomatic solution that embraces an offshore strategy could be an alternative approach to not only the nuclear crisis in Korea but for a sustainable long-term solution to Northeast Asia stability and security.

In this paper, I argue that the removal of U.S. ground forces from South Korea could be the catalyst to compel North Korea to denuclearize through a grand bargain while still maintaining regional stability and security. To support this, this paper will build on the structural realist perspective for the causes of North Korea's nuclear ambition and further provide insight into why previous attempts of diplomatic efforts have failed to deliver results. Additionally, this paper expands the concepts of offshore balancing to support the theoretical possibility of removing permanent U.S. forces in South Korea while still providing regional stability and security in the region. Finally, a negotiation framework is presented to outline how this diplomatic solution could potentially be achieved.

## History and culture

The history and culture of a country provide insight into how values and norms of society came to be, and Korea is no exception. An understanding of Korean history and culture provides some explanation into how and why the Kim family and the North Korean people have been able to defy the odds and maintain their rogue regime. The isolated North Korea government witnessed today didn't happen by accident, but was built over decades of brutal occupation by foreign countries. These occupations have caused North Korea to see itself and the rest of the world in a unique way. Korea has a long legacy of occupation starting with the Chinese who invaded northern Korea in 108 B.C and stayed until 308 A.D. Next, the Mongols occupied Korea in 1259, staying for 111 years. Japan invaded and occupied Korea in 1910 until the end of World War II in 1945.<sup>7</sup> Finally, after World War II, the U.S occupied the newly created South Korea while the Russians briefly occupied the North and installed Kim II-sung as the North Korean leader. The Korean War itself was traumatic for the Korean people which further drove a new sense of nationalism.

After centuries of occupation and oppression, a unique Korean trait manifested itself within the Korean character. This trait, known as "Hahn," associates with a sense of shame, insecurity, and national sense of inferiority.<sup>8</sup> Although hahn is a negative trait, the Kim regime has capitalized on it to rally the population into the belief of hard work to redeem Korea's honor and save face.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Confucian tradition, a historical belief system ingrained in Korean culture, has significantly influenced the social and political structure and values the Koreans hold today.<sup>10</sup> Under this tradition, respect and submission to fathers and those in authority positions is paramount. The Kim regime has leveraged this tradition to establish a paternalistic government with the Kim's serving as the father figure of the nation.<sup>11</sup> In many ways, this

unique cultural feature distinguishes the North Korean leadership from other historical dictatorships and is a primary reason the Kim dynasty has remained in power for over 60 years.<sup>12</sup> However, other cultural factors have contributed to the unique identity of the North Koreans, perhaps none more than the idea of Juche.

A key concept of North Korean culture called Juche, or the principle of self-reliance, guides the attitude and behavior of the North Korean people. Kim Il-sung introduced Juche in 1955, an idea that was later indoctrinated into the Korean constitution by Kim Jong-Il.<sup>13</sup> The juche principle and concepts of socialism are closely associated and are used to drive North Korea's long-term objective of self-reliant independence.<sup>14</sup> Juche is taught and repeated in schools and through the media constantly reinforcing nationalism, self-reliance, and reverence to the dear leader.<sup>15</sup> Part of the juche evolution is primacy of the military called songun or "military first," a national priority and status placed upon the military and defense, which also helps explain the drive to possess nuclear weapons. In this case, North Korea's desire to become a nuclear power fulfills the juche principle by achieving a military capability that the DPRK believes will finally allow the regime to be secure, self-reliant, and independent.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the North Korean people believe they have to follow their Dear Leader Kim since he is the only one that can protect them against the evils of the world.<sup>17</sup> Korean history, culture, and the juche principle all collectively drive North Korean society to follow the Kim regime and also drives the regime towards developing a nuclear weapons program. However, history and culture are not the only reasons for North Korea's nuclear ambitions; North Korea also has strategic interests that are compelling them to become a nuclear state.



## North Korean Strategic Interests

Beyond North Korea's culture, the DPRK has several motives for gaining nuclear weapons. Understanding these reasons could provide insight into a different approach to a diplomatic strategy. North Korea claims its nuclear development program is for defensive purposes only against a U.S. invasion.<sup>18</sup> The North Koreans believe the U.S. bases in South Korea are staging posts for an upcoming invasion. By becoming a nuclear weapons state, the DPRK believes it will be able to deter U.S. aggression.<sup>19</sup> The North Koreans hold up Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya as examples of what happens to countries that do not have nuclear weapons to deter the U.S. from attacking.<sup>20</sup> In all three of these recent U.S. military interventions, the attacked country did not have nuclear weapons. The Libya case highlights why the North Koreans could be hesitant to give up their nuclear weapons peacefully. In this case, the Libyan government voluntarily gave up its nuclear program in exchange for an end to sanctions, to include better relations with the international community, and a security guarantee. However, just eight years later, the Qaddafi regime was overthrown by a popular uprising, an uprising supported by NATO and the U.S.<sup>21</sup> Finally, a unique perspective is provided by former Defense Secretary William Perry who said of the DPRK, "While they have many reasons for wanting this missile program, their primary reason is security, is deterrence. Who would they be deterring? They would be deterring the United States. We do not think of ourselves as a threat to North Korea, but I fully believe that they consider us a threat to them."<sup>22</sup>

Of all the reasons the DPRK has for gaining nuclear weapons, none are as important as regime survival. The Kim dynasty has long believed that the secret to survival and reunification of the Korean peninsula on their terms is through nuclear weapons.<sup>23</sup> By possessing nuclear weapons, the North Koreans believe they can deter the U.S. from attacking, thus preserving their

way of life. In addition, North Korea seeks a peace treaty with the U.S. which it believes would subsequently lead to the removal of U.S. forces as well as the reunification of the peninsula under its terms.<sup>24</sup> The untested question is, would a peace treaty and removal of U.S. forces, both top strategic priorities for North Korea, be enough to compel the North Korean government to denuclearize? The corollary to this question is, would the removal of U.S. forces from South Korea lead to instability and less regional security?

### **Current Stakeholder Interests**

Multiple countries are stakeholders in the growing threat of nuclear weapons possessed by the North Koreans. However, South Korea may have the most interest given the threat of the DPRK's goal of reunification under their terms. As such, the Republic Of Korea's (ROK) primary military threat is the DPRK. A nuclear-armed North Korea exponentially escalates the security dilemma between North and South Korea and presents a new and higher strategic threat for them. To counter this emerging threat, the South Koreans will continue to deter North Korean provocations and expand security cooperation through bilateral and multilateral relations and alliances with the U.S. and regional countries.<sup>25</sup> As outlined in the South Korean National Security plan, South Korea and the U.S. have jointly developed a robust tailored deterrence strategy to counter this threat.<sup>26</sup> In addition, the South Korean government has set strategic goals to cooperate with the international community and regional partners to create the right conditions for the DPRK to choose to abandon their nuclear weapons peacefully.<sup>27</sup> However, given the DPRK's nuclear ambitions, the ROK has also had internal discussions regarding the feasibility of developing its own nuclear capability.<sup>28</sup> This action would not be well received by any of the regional stakeholders, nor likely to gain much support from the U.S.<sup>29</sup> Finally, the South Korean government envisions a sustainable peace with North Korea and eventual reunification.<sup>30</sup> Given

these interests, the ROK is seeking a peaceful solution to the nuclear issue in North Korea, but so are other regional stakeholders like China.

The Chinese-North Korean relationship as we know it today built its foundation during the Korean War as Mao and Kim Il-sung, both start up communist leaders at that time, allied themselves against the U.S. and the United Nations forces. This political bond continues today with China maintaining political support for the Kim regime. Much has changed since the Korean War; China has adapted its economy and is the rising economic and military power in Northeast Asia. As such, China is primarily interested in maintaining stability on the Korean peninsula.<sup>31</sup> In addition, China uses North Korea to buffer it from the democratic South Koreans as well as the U.S. forces stationed there.<sup>32</sup> Any sudden change in the status quo and loss of stability in North Korea would be detrimental to Chinese interests in the Korean peninsula. For example, the threat of a flood of refugees into China following a sudden DPRK regime collapse would create a significant burden on the Chinese.<sup>33</sup>

The Chinese continue to support the Kim regime through trade. The Chinese have increased trade with North Korea tenfold since the year 2000, peaking in 2014 at \$6.86 billion, accounting for 90% of North Korea's trade.<sup>34</sup> As a result, the effectiveness of future economic sanctions will ultimately depend on how well the Chinese are able or willing to implement effective sanctions on restricted trade. Finally, China still has a mutual assistance alliance with North Korea including an obligation to intervene against unprovoked aggression against North Korea.<sup>35</sup> As shown, the Chinese have historically supported the North Korea government, more so for their own stability and security than that of the DPRK.

Japan has a legacy of tension with both North and South Korea due to the historical memories of previous colonial rule.<sup>36</sup> This legacy is of real concern of a potential arms race that could develop as the probability of North Korea's nuclear program increases.<sup>37</sup> From an alliance

standpoint, Japan has been hesitant to engage in a full three-way alliance with South Korea and the U.S., mostly due to the colonial history, but also for lack of will to engage in a war in Korea that this alliance could demand.<sup>38</sup> In addition, the Japanese constitution outlines that it will not possess an Army capable of waging war.<sup>39</sup> However, given the rise of North Korea's nuclear threat, as well as the emerging threat of China, the Japanese Parliament began allowing overseas combat missions in 2015.<sup>40</sup> As a result, as the security threat of nuclear weapons increases on the Korea peninsula, so does Japan's perceived need to militarily balance against it.

The Russian government has a legacy of military and economic support to the communist North Korean government, support that lasted until the end of the Soviet Union.<sup>41</sup> Russian support for the North Koreans began with the establishment of the Kim regime following World War II. The Soviet Union provided military aid and training to the newly formed communist Kim regime during the Korean War and continued until the Soviet Union's collapse. However, Russia still has strategic interests in the North Korea. First, the Russians seek stability of North Korea through a status quo scenario.<sup>42</sup> For this reason, the Russians do not want to see the North Koreans continue to develop their nuclear weapons as they are concerned the DPRK could cause an arms race in the region.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the Russian government would support a diplomatic effort that denuclearized North Korea but would be against military action or regime change.<sup>44</sup>

The United States has a key interest in the security and stability of Northeast Asia which would be undermined by a nuclear North Korea. As outlined in the 2015 U.S. National Security Strategy, the U.S is fully committed to the denuclearization of North Korea.<sup>45</sup> As such, the U.S. is firmly committed to the stability and security of Northeast Asia; any loss of U.S. influence in this region would not serve the United States national strategic interest. Part of the U.S. interest in Northeast Asia is the result of this region's growing economic power comprising 60% of the

world's GDP.<sup>46</sup> In addition, this region is host to the world's six largest military budgets.<sup>47</sup> As such, U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan are vitally important to providing overall stability to this region.<sup>48</sup> In 2011, the U.S. confirmed its commitment to the defense of the ROK, to include a nuclear umbrella intended to deter North Korea.<sup>49</sup> Finally, some argue that the U.S. presence in Korea is thought to stabilize the region and a withdrawal of forces would be considered a retreat and would destabilize the region.<sup>50</sup>

### **Past Negotiations**

For decades, through diplomatic efforts, the DPRK has made agreements with the United States to dismantle its nuclear program, and despite great effort, these past agreements have failed to compel North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. The 1994 Agreed Framework was the first agreement between the U.S. and North Korea, an agreement to freeze and eventually dismantle DPRK's nuclear program in exchange for economic aid and energy resources, to include normalization of relations.<sup>51</sup> By 2002, the Agreed Framework broke down, essentially due to a lack of trust, each nation being suspicious of the other with concerns of cheating and not living up to agreements. As a result, the U.S. stopped shipping fuel oil, and in response, the DPRK kicked the IAEA inspectors out and restarted their plutonium reactor.<sup>52</sup> In 2007, President Bush offered aid and relaxed sanctions in return for the DPRK freezing its nuclear program; however, this deal broke down as well due to trust issues between both parties.<sup>53</sup> In 2012, the U.S. and DPRK once again agreed to exchange aid for a freeze in the DPRK nuclear program; however, the DPRK broke this agreement shortly after the agreement after the North Korean's conducted a nuclear test.<sup>54</sup> The U.S. has tried diplomatic options from normalization of relations to significant financial aid programs, none of which proved to deliver any sustained results.<sup>55</sup>

Despite decades of diplomatic effort, no U.S. leader has been able to array the right combination of political tools to force North Korea to choose between nuclear weapons and regime survival.<sup>56</sup> In the end, the U.S. has not offered a diplomatic solution set that adequately addresses the root cause of North Korea's nuclear ambition. As a result, the North Koreans have calculated the benefits of acquiring nuclear weapons to be greater than the cost of past diplomatic sanctions. As a result, tensions continue to increase as the North Korean government advances its nuclear weapons program. The North Korean government claims that tensions can only be reduced by formally ending the war, establishing diplomatic relations, and by ending the UN command in South Korea.<sup>57</sup>

### **Presence of U.S. Forces**

The possibility of a U.S. force reduction and eventual removal of U.S. forces in Korea could be the final variable that creates a breakthrough in the deadlocked denuclearization effort that has endured for over 25 years and multiple U.S. presidential administrations. In a recent study by Nicholas Anderson, quantitative evidence indicates a lack of effectiveness with all previous U.S. efforts to either encourage or punish North Korea to give up its nuclear ambition.<sup>58</sup> This analysis measured changes in North Korean nuclear development activity in relation to various levels of engagement by the United States, as measured by incentives or sanctions, while the dependent variable, nuclear proliferation activity, was measured as a response. In this case, North Korea's nuclear and missile development program continued in one form or another throughout U.S. diplomatic engagement activity, which seems to indicate little to no relationship between the incentives and sanctions, the independent variables, and North Korea's nuclear development activity, the dependent variable.

The one constant throughout North Korea's nuclear development timeline is the presence of U.S. forces on the peninsula.<sup>59</sup> As a result, this data supports the structural realist view that the cause of North Korea's nuclear ambition, a security dilemma, is being driven by U.S. power and geographic position on the Korean peninsula.<sup>60</sup> Finally, until the U.S. reconsiders the position of U.S. forces in Korea, engaging in future negotiations with the North Koreans with continued diplomatic combinations of incentives of threats, will not produce different results from past engagements. Until the U.S. addresses the structural issue on the peninsula, the North Korean nuclear program will remain as it has been.

By viewing the North Korean nuclear program through a structural and security lens, the relentless and ineffective U.S. diplomatic efforts are easier to understand. To further illustrate the lack of effectiveness of U.S. diplomatic efforts in dealing with this structural issue, each administration from Reagan to Obama has tried various degrees of diplomacy with North Korea's nuclear program.<sup>61</sup> Also, each U.S. administration, in one form or another attempted to influence North Korea to enter the prosperous free market that the rest of the Asian region enjoyed.<sup>62</sup> As far as appealing at the highest level, two past U.S. presidents personally visited the North Korean leader, and the last three have reached out via letter extending a personal plea for dialogue between the two countries, all to no avail in stopping North Korea's nuclear ambition.<sup>63</sup> As a result, until the structural issue of the presence of U.S. forces on the Korean peninsula is dealt with, no other combinations of diplomatic offers will be of use. In the end, U.S. presence on the Korean peninsula appears to be the key factor to North Korea's nuclear calculus, and until the U.S. proposes a modification in the status of permanent U.S. forces, no combination of diplomatic offers will be effective.

## Deterrence

Deterring a North Korean attack is critical to ensuring regional stability in Northeast Asia. As such, if U.S. forces are withdrawn, the ability of the ROK armed forces to defend themselves is critical. The question is, can they? To calculate this is difficult, but many believe South Korea can defend itself from a conventional attack from North Korea. Dr. Stephen Schwalbe, an associate professor at American Military University, suggests the South Korean armed forces, while numerically disadvantaged, have greater overall military capability compared to North Korea.<sup>64</sup> The ROK is about half the size of DPRK's army; however, the South Korean forces possess state of the art weapons and technology, a true force equalizer.<sup>65</sup> Also, the economic power between North and South Korea is significantly different. South Korea's free-market industrial economic power as measured by GDP is \$1.5 trillion, the world's 12th largest. In contrast, North Korea's economy only generates \$30 billion, ranked 115<sup>th</sup> in the world.<sup>66</sup> Further, given the ample economic wealth, South Korea spends seven times the amount that North Korea does on its armed forces. However, South Korea only spends 2.6% of its GDP on military spending; it could spend more if it needed to.<sup>67</sup> In comparison, North Korea spends 23% of its GDP on its armed forces, leaving little room to do more than it does today.<sup>68</sup> Given South Korea's current force posture and significant economic means, it is indisputable that the South can defend itself from the North<sup>69</sup>

Military balance between South and North Korea is a key issue that has historically held the U.S. back from withdrawing from Korea. As far back as 1987, a military study concluded that ROK armed forces ability to balance that of the North was the number one issue preventing the U.S. from removing forces from South Korea without disrupting the military or political stability of the region.<sup>70</sup> Beyond deterring the North Koreans, the reason the U.S. would remain in Korea,



according to this 1987 study, was to counter the Soviet expansion into the region.<sup>71</sup> However, the South Koreans have since achieved military parity, and the Soviet Union has since dissolved, Communist expansion is no longer a threat. Given these conditions, the only plausible reason to maintain forces in South Korea is for regional stability and maintaining U.S. influence in the region. Assuming the ROK has the military capability to deter the DPRK without U.S. forces, the next unanswered question is regional stability.

### **Regional Stability**

Maintaining regional stability in Northeast Asia could be achieved through the concepts outlined in an offshore balancing strategy. Offshore balancing, as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt describe, is a grand strategy concept that ensures the U.S. could preserve its power into the future by first ensuring the U.S. maintains dominance in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>72</sup> The second priority to this grand strategy is to counter regional hegemony, primarily in Northeast Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.<sup>73</sup> However, instead of the U.S. taking the lead in providing the resources in policing all the regions as the past, the respective allied regional countries would be expected to stand up and lead in providing their regional security.<sup>74</sup> The end state is for the regional hegemon, in this case, China, to be concerned with its neighbors, not the United States.<sup>75</sup>

The U.S. has a vital interest in Northeast Asia, but the current strategy of regional hegemony, based on military power, may not be the means to do so. Victor Cha recently stated, "I don't think in today's climate that, if there was no longer a North Korean threat, we would have ground troops on the (Korean) peninsula."<sup>76</sup> Cha's statement implies the enduring mission of U.S. forces remaining in Korea post-peace treaty or reunification, would not be required or justified for regional stability. Doug Bandow suggests that U.S. military hegemony is not necessary, nor

is it an optimal way of achieving America's interest. As Bandow suggests, Japan is an economic leader that should provide regional stability and security in Northeast Asia, as well as other regional powers that have a vested interest in balancing Chinese expansion and influence.<sup>77</sup> In this case, mid-size powers like South Korea, Vietnam, and Indonesia, all of which have historical suspicions of Chinese power, could be pivotal in countering Chinese influence in the region. Another potential solution could take the form in a new multi-lateral military alliance already starting to take shape, one led by the Japanese under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a concept labeled as the "democratic security diamond."<sup>78</sup> The proposed alliance would encompass like-minded democratic countries of Japan, India, Australia, and the United States. The democratic security diamond would be a formidable economic and military alliance that could mitigate the risk of the U.S. lost balance of power. Coupled with the strategic alignment with other regional powers such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Singapore, and the Philippines, the overall net positive impact on U.S. influenced regional stability could be significant.

Bandow further suggests that the U.S. should not be the guarantor of Asia's security when these other allied partners have the means to provide their own security.<sup>79</sup> A recent award-winning study at the Air University School of Advanced Air and Space Studies paper concluded the same thing. In this study, in accordance with balance of power concepts, it proposes that the U.S. should make regional force withdrawals. To fill this power vacuum and to deter the expansion of Chinese power and greater influence, Japan and other regional countries would be required to build military capability or face domination from China. In the end, these regional countries would have to act on their own self-interest of freedom and sovereignty, a motivational factor that will drive their national security strategy. As a result, this will lead to an increase in investment in their respective military, thus increased security.<sup>80</sup> Further, this

study concluded that offshore balancing was the best option for the United States in Northeast Asia, and further recommends Japan as the key balance of power to China for regional hegemony.<sup>81</sup> As such, Washington should suggest to Tokyo that it will not object to their more active political and military positioning in the region. In the meantime, the U.S. should use its diplomatic influence to be the honest broker to reduce the historically based fear of a militarily strong Japan, thereby ensuring greater security cooperation takes place between Japan and its regional neighbors.<sup>82</sup>

To assist in leading this effort, the U.S. should continue its current alliances as they are. Additionally, a small permanent U.S. forces headquarters element should remain in South Korea to assist in the coordination of joint exercises. Also, the U.S. should rotate air and naval assets through South Korean bases to demonstrate U.S. commitment to our alliance with South Korea, as well as supporting South Korea's deterrence objectives.<sup>83</sup> Further, the U.S. headquarters element in South Korea could assist in providing leadership in the collective security of U.S. alliances in the region. For example, the collective development of anti-access and aerial denial zones could demonstrate the joint power of the regional military forces in containing Chinese power, specifically in the contested waters in Asia.<sup>84</sup> In the end, as offshore balancing suggests, when countries are required to face their regional security challenges without the prospect of offloading them onto the United States, they are more likely to rise and contain the crisis themselves, based on their self-interest.<sup>85</sup>

### **Recommendation**

As part of a future diplomatic engagement, both the U.S. and North Korea should agree to the establishment of direct talks. Given the lack of diplomatic progress in the past, real dialogue and compromise will be required to find opportunities for all stakeholders. Further,

while the proposed negotiated solutions center around the United States and North Korea, the impact of these negotiations must consider other key stakeholders. The recommended negotiated solutions are as follows:

1. Drop Complete, Verifiable and Irreversible Dismantlement (CVID) of the North Korean nuclear program from the pre-conditions of negotiation. Requiring CVID before the talks even begin has been a non-starter and is preventing talks from occurring. CVID should be the goal of the negotiation, the end state of the deliberation. By forcing this as a pre-condition, the U.S. is negotiating before the negotiation even starts. By eliminating this pre-condition, the U.S. is making the first reconciliation move which opens the door for negotiations to begin. As negotiations begin, all sanctions would remain in place.
2. Agree to six-party talks to include: China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and the United States. The collaborative effort of the six-party talks ensures key stakeholders are part of the solution. Multi-lateral dialogue also gains stakeholder buy-in to include a commitment to agreements. The multilateral approach also leverages the economic power of each stakeholder to administer sanctions if North Korea fails to live up to any agreements it makes, an issue the North Koreans have had in the past.
3. Agree to a freeze of the North Korean nuclear and ballistic missile program and testing for the temporary cessation of large joint exercises in South Korea. To improve the chance of compliance by the North Koreans and to mitigate the trust issues of the past, utilize an innovative approach proposed by Dr. Lyle Goldstein, a U.S. Naval War College professor who proposes the use of Chinese officials instead of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to provide oversight of the initial denuclearization efforts.<sup>86</sup> Dr. Goldstein suggests using Chinese officials to account for and manage oversight of the

nuclear program and to ensure nuclear proliferation to other countries is not occurring.<sup>87</sup>

Further, by placing the Chinese in an oversight role, the reporting and accuracy of North Korean denuclearization progress is shared with China. As a result, the Chinese will have a shared responsibility and incentive to see the North Koreans denuclearize.

4. Verified North Korean denuclearization along with a phased U.S. force reduction. In effort to overcome the trust and transparency challenges of past agreements, the Chinese will verify the North Korean nuclear arsenal is reduced. In conjunction with the North Korean phased denuclearization, U.S. permanent party forces will be reduced to below 5,000 personnel. Continuing along the suggestions by Dr. Goldstein, the Chinese will continue to provide oversight of the North Korea's denuclearization effort, thus giving the denuclearization effort a much higher probability of success.<sup>88</sup> Considering Korea's history and culture, the U.S troop withdrawal compromise provides a means for the North Korean government to save face, a key component of the Korean culture that could be the catalyst to achieving a breakthrough in the negotiations. In addition, compliance is enhanced by leveraging Asian culture and customs of the use of arbitrators. In this case, initial denuclearization progress and verification is given to the Chinese to mediate and verify, without the IAEA inspectors, at least initially until trust is built up. If denuclearization is truly the objective, these two cultural factors, if leveraged, could jumpstart the final resolution to this decades old dilemma. As part of North Korea's denuclearization efforts, it would submit denuclearization status reports, verified by the Chinese, to the six-party members. By placing the Chinese in this oversight position, accountability for credible progress is increased, subjecting Chinese credibility on the line for accurate reporting of North Korea's denuclearization efforts.<sup>89</sup> By placing the

Chinese as the agent responsible for the accuracy of North Korean denuclearization compliance instead of IAEA agents, higher fidelity of North Korean compliance, an issue in the past, could be increased.<sup>90</sup> As progress is made in North Korea's denuclearization efforts, corresponding sanctions will be lifted. In addition, the number of U.S. forces are reduced with each phase of verified reduction of North Korean nuclear capabilities. At this point, the establishment of formal diplomatic relations would take place between North Korea and the U.S. to anchor the improved relations. Finally, the six-party participants would agree to additional economic incentives with phased improvements of North Korea's denuclearization efforts. Six-party participants would share the burden of financial aid incentives to North Korea.

5. IAEA verification of the completion of the irreversible dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear program. Once the North Korean denuclearization is reported as completed by both the Chinese and North Koreans, the IAEA would be brought in to validate the previous verification work the Chinese had conducted. Upon validation, the U.S. and North Korea would sign a final peace treaty, and a final U.S. force reduction would take place. However, the U.S. would maintain a residual U.S. force headquarters contingent that would remain in South Korea as part of the U.S.-ROK alliance to coordinate future joint exercises and other alliance management efforts.

### **Benefits**

The urgent strategic goal of the United States, a denuclearized North Korea, is accomplished through peaceful means. The achievement of this objective eliminates the physical threat to the U.S. and further blocks the potential nuclear proliferation of nuclear technology and materials from reaching third party or terrorist organizations. Assuming this is achieved through

diplomatic efforts, given that war would probably be the only other realistic way to ensure a denuclearized North Korea, the additional cost prevention benefits are significant. In this case, as one previous U.S. commander in Korea, GEN Gary Luck told President Clinton, a second Korean War would kill 1,000,000 people, cost the U.S. \$1 billion, and cause \$1 trillion in damage.<sup>91</sup> These are staggering costs that if accurate, makes the diplomatic solution more compelling. Also, a 2012 Senate Armed Services Committee report indicated the non-personnel cost for U.S. operations in South Korea totaled \$1.1 billion.<sup>92</sup> As such, the U.S. could generate over \$1 billion in savings from the removal of forces from Korea, money that could be reallocated to other defense priorities, back into an important domestic program or used towards debt reduction. However, perhaps the greatest soft long-term benefit is this new way of dealing with wicked problems. Specifically, by collaborating with China as a means to resolve global challenges, specifically in Asia, could be a breakthrough. By leveraging China's influence over North Korea, albeit by trusting the Chinese to ensure denuclearization is progressing and is verifiable, would be a significant breakthrough and could form a new relationship between the U.S. and China that otherwise would be impossible. Untold new solutions to future challenges could be jointly worked together between the Chinese and the U.S. given this new relationship.

### **Implications**

The removal of nuclear weapons from North Korea achieves the objective set out from the National Security Strategy,<sup>93</sup> that's a win. The tradeoff is the phased elimination of permanent U.S. forces from South Korea. This force reduction has the potential to reduce our ability to project power not only in Korea but also in the region. However, the U.S.- ROK alliance would still be intact, and the U.S. would still have capabilities in Japan which could quickly respond if needed. Furthermore, the U.S. would still have access to airfields and ports in Korea, so military

power projection is still available. In addition, the U.S. and ROK would continue joint exercises, and U.S. air and naval assets would still rotate through South Korean bases to show U.S. commitment to South Korea and the region. The key trade-off is the time it would take to physically project forces back into South Korea in the event of a North Korean attack if U.S. forces are even needed. However, the fact that we can still expeditiously project military power with relative speed reduces the risk tremendously.

Furthermore, given deterrent theory emphasizes the threat of force as the means to its effectiveness, so long as our alliance with South Korea remains strong and the ROK continues to maintain its superior armed forces, the deterrent threat should remain effective against a North Korea attack. Other concerns include the future influence of Chinese hegemonic power in the region. To counter this, offshore strategy theory suggests the regional powers will counter the rising Chinese influence; the key is to ensure the U.S. alliances of these regional powers stay strong. The greater threat to U.S. interests could be the change in alliance preference of the South Koreans from the U.S. to China, especially given the significant trade relationships they have with one another. This challenge is real, but the mitigation of this risk should be handled primarily through diplomatic and economic relationships and partnerships. That said, the U.S. should continue to practice joint exercises with the South Korean armed forces, just as we do with many of our allies, but we should do so in a way and possibly in a location that is not perceived as such a threat to North Korea as they are today. In the end, the United States achieves the strategic objective of a denuclearized North Korea with the trade-off being the slow removal of U.S. forces from South Korea, all done through soft power. Given the alternatives, this diplomatic solution could be the best option.



The perception of appeasement and potential weakness of the U.S. for withdrawing forces is an optical issue that must be managed. To counter this, the U.S. would need to utilize an intense information operation campaign to influence stakeholders of the continued U.S. strategic interest and support in stability and security of the region. Finally, to help offset the optics of withdrawal, the U.S. could potentially move the transitioned forces to Guam as a way of keeping the symbolic gesture of U.S. commitment to the region. Finally, a communication plan that outlines the future-state mutuality supported multi-lateral economic and military alliance structure that is eventually galvanized between Japan, India, Australia, the U.S., possibly South Korea and other regional countries with shared values will be paramount.

### **Conclusion**

As shown, the United States could achieve the strategic objective of a denuclearized North Korea with the trade-off being the removal of U.S. forces from South Korea. Assuming we could still maintain the balance of power through our alliances in the region, from a realist off-shore balancing perspective, the U.S. achieves a win-win solution. The diplomatic approach outlined in this paper intentionally expands the zone of possibilities of diplomatic solutions that all parties might agree to. Obviously, this requires compromise, the toughest part of any negotiation. As shown, so long as U.S. forces are in South Korea, the likelihood of North Korea agreeing to give up their nuclear weapons is highly unlikely. If the North Korean conundrum is to be solved diplomatically, it will likely require a compromise such as a withdrawal U.S. forces from South Korea. In the past, this would not have even been an option since the ROK was unable to defend itself.

Today the ROK has the military power to defend themselves without the 28,500 U.S. armed forces there now. In addition, our alliance would still hold, and the U.S. would respond to

any attack on South Korea. As such, the justification of the presence of U.S. forces for the deterrence of a North Korean can be reconsidered. Finally, regional security and stability, a concern if U.S. forces are removed from South Korea, might be offset by the implementation of an offshore balance strategy where allied regional powers check the rising threat from China.

Finally, a cooperative negotiation strategy to denuclearize North Korea is demonstrated to show how the withdrawal of U.S. forces might be integrated into the negotiation strategy. The challenge with this diplomatic solution is the compromise required to gain agreement and the imponderables associated with these changes. Whether the compromise of U.S. forces in South Korea is worth the peaceful denuclearization of North Korea, that's difficult to calculate, but a denuclearized North Korea would certainly be an achievement, and given the alternatives, it could very well be a win.



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