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Should the U.S. Continue a Policy of Denuclearization Toward North Korea?



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Introduction:

The fall of the Soviet Union forced the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) to grapple with the idea of fending for itself. Protection from an outside, increasingly western world perceived as hostile to the DPRK was no longer assured. The Kim regime anchored its legitimacy and survival on global recognition as a credible nuclear-capable state. Kim Jong-Un said North Korea's "ultimate goal is to possess the world's most powerful strategic [nuclear] force, the absolute force unprecedented in the century."¹ The regime's pomp and circumstance surrounding nuclear testing and missile launches indicate intent for further development and provocation.

Each U.S. president since Clinton has, in one form or another, held denuclearization as a precondition for negotiations with the DPRK. Over thirty years of U.S. policies with denuclearization at their core have resulted in further nuclear development and missile testing. Indeed, as of 2022, experts "cautiously estimate that North Korea might have produced sufficient fissile material to build 45 to 55 nuclear weapons and might have assembled 20 to 30 warheads for delivery primarily by medium-range ballistic missiles".² Considering the consistent failure of previous efforts, should the U.S. continue a denuclearization policy toward the DPRK?

The United States should adjust its policy from denuclearization to limiting further nuclear development while recognizing the DPRK as a de facto nuclear-capable state for the following three reasons. First, three decades of U.S. denuclearization efforts have failed to

¹ Josh, Smith, "Kim Jong Un Says North Korea Aims to Have the World's Strongest Nuclear Force" *Reuters*, November 27, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/kim-jong-un-says-north-koreas-goal-is-worlds-strongest-nuclear-force-2022-11-26/>.

² Hans M. Kristensen and Matt Korda, "Nuclear Notebook: How many nuclear weapons does North Korea have in 2022?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, September 8, 2022, <https://thebulletin.org/premium/2022-09/nuclear-notebook-how-many-nuclear-weapons-does-north-korea-have-in-2022/#post-heading>.

prevent the DPRK from achieving nuclear capability. Second, the DPRK will not relinquish its nuclear weapons peacefully. The Kim regime views other states that have relinquished weapons of mass destruction as cautionary tales to be avoided by maintaining a credible nuclear capability. Finally, denuclearization efforts are costly monetarily and diplomatically.

Denuclearization: “It’s déjà vu all over again”³

U.S. presidents' policies dating back to the Clinton administration have failed in different ways to stifle North Korean nuclear ambitions. Clinton successfully negotiated the Agreed Framework of 1994. In return for shutting down the Yongbyon nuclear power plant, the DPRK would receive concessions by way of “oil deliveries, a phasing-out of economic sanctions, and help with the construction of a light water reactor for energy production.”⁴ While both the DPRK and the United States adhered to the agreement until 1996, the U.S. Congress delayed funds and failed to reduce sanctions resulting in the Yongbyon plant reactivating in 1998 and the Agreed Framework officially falling apart in 2003.⁵ Kim Jong-Il’s DPRK conducted one intermediate-range ballistic missile test in 1998.⁶

The DPRK withdrew from the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) in 2003, admitting for the first time to possessing nuclear weapons, an event which was the genesis of The Six-Party Talks.⁷ In an attempt to avoid the mistakes of his predecessor, President Bush commenced a hawkish “dismantle first, talk later” policy he hoped would achieve

³ As quoted by Yogi Berra.

⁴ Sarah Lohschelder, “Three Presidents Facing North Korea - a Review of U.S. Foreign Policy” *HuffPost*, February 27, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/three-presidents-facing-n_b_9335546.

⁵ Lohschelder, “Three Presidents Facing North Korea - a Review of U.S. Foreign Policy.

⁶ Missile Defense Project, “North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present,” *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 20, 2017, last modified December 19, 2022, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>.

⁷ Lohschelder, “Three Presidents Facing North Korea - a Review of U.S. Foreign Policy.

verifiable nuclear disarmament.⁸ The DPRK continued its missile and nuclear testing and officially withdrew from the Six-Party Talks in 2009. Notably, before commencing the Six-Party Talks, the Bush Administration was also openly advocating for regime change in the DPRK, efforts which also clearly failed. During the Bush administration, Kim Jong-II conducted forty-three short, medium, and long-range ballistic missile tests and two nuclear tests.⁹

President Obama's policy of strategic patience was an effort to meld the dovish Clinton policy with that of the hawkish Bush policy while implementing the lessons learned from both. Obama attempted to leverage China against the DPRK, but it proved to be "reluctant to put too much pressure on the regime for fear of destabilizing its reclusive neighbor."¹⁰ President Obama was successful in negotiating the 2012 Leap Day Deal where "Pyongyang agreed to suspend work at the state-of-the-art uranium-enrichment plant at Yongbyon that it had suddenly revealed to a visiting U.S. nuclear scientist in November 2010, to halt nuclear and missile tests, and to allow inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) back into the country after a three-year absence" in exchange for 240,000 tons of food aid.¹¹

The Leap Day Deal fell apart weeks later when the new leader of the DPRK, Kim Jong-Un, "ordered the testing of a space rocket as his diplomats improbably claimed that this was not covered by the agreement."¹² The Obama administration subsequently reverted to denuclearization as a precondition for talks stance. While it should be recognized that the Obama administration did not repeat the mistakes of Clinton and Bush, concessions without verification

⁸ Lohschelder, "Three Presidents Facing North Korea - a Review of U.S. Foreign Policy.

⁹ Missile Defense Project, "North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present".

¹⁰ Lohschelder, "Three Presidents Facing North Korea - a Review of U.S. Foreign Policy.

¹¹ Mark Fitzpatrick, "Leap Day in North Korea" *Foreign Policy*, 29 February 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/29/leap-day-in-north-korea/>

¹² Mark Fitzpatrick, "North Korea: Obama's Prime Nonproliferation Failure" *Arms Control Association*, December 2016, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-11/features/north-korea-obama%E2%80%99s-prime-nonproliferation-failure>.

and a failed regime change policy, respectively, the DPRK did continue to advance its nuclear and missile development program by conducting 90 land-based missile launches, six submarine missile launches, and four nuclear tests during the eight years of the Obama administration.¹³

President Trump traded potent rhetoric with the Kim regime, perhaps most notoriously demonstrated by the infamous rocket man and dotard exchanges, at the onset of his presidency before assuming a more hawkish approach of “maximum pressure and engagement.”¹⁴ Trump’s Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said, “Let me be very clear: the policy of strategic patience has ended”¹⁵ in Seoul after visiting the demilitarized zone. President Trump’s policy was the first attempt at linking the survival of the Kim regime with nuclear weapons and forcing a choice between the two. Promising negotiations between the U.S. and the DPRK stagnated, then failed, devolving into further missile tests and provocation; 39 missile launches of differing variants between 2019-2021, and 69, the most in any single year, occurring in 2022.¹⁶

Currently, the Biden administration’s DPRK policy emphasizes diplomatic engagement with the aim of practical progress, reducing tensions, and the “complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula” as the “ultimate goal.”¹⁷ Here again, denuclearization, albeit complete denuclearization, is at the core of the U.S. policy toward North Korea. Recent history has proven that the hope of incremental progress toward denuclearization is just that, a hope relegated to the realm of lofty rhetoric, serving only to isolate the DPRK from the U.S. further.

¹³ Missile Defense Project, "North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present".

¹⁴ Evans J. R. Revere, "The Trump administration's North Korea Policy: Headed for Success or failure?" *Brookings*, 10 July 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/07/10/the-trump-administrations-north-korea-policy-headed-for-success-or-failure/>.

¹⁵ Matthew Pennington, "Tillerson: Pre-emptive force an option with NKorea" *AP NEWS*, 17 March 2017., <https://apnews.com/article/politics-asia-pacific-diplomacy-weapons-of-mass-destruction-rex-tillerson-b33b4c77db5043dfba2d47350071f183>.

¹⁶ Missile Defense Project, "North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present".

¹⁷ Elisabeth Suh, "Biden's North Korea policy" *DGAP, German Council on Foreign Relations*, 1 October 2021, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/bidens-north-korea-policy>.

Diplomatic engagement seems untenable when complete denuclearization is fundamentally at odds with the idea that nuclear weapons are considered indispensable to the Kim regime's survival. Nuclear weapons are “part of an investment the regime is making to enforce and inspire unity at home, and to ensure loyalty to a family determined to hold onto power for decades to come.”¹⁸ A substantial investment indeed, considering that “between 2010 and 2019, military expenditures accounted for an estimated 20-25% of North Korea's GDP annually.”¹⁹ Notably, the agricultural production of the DPRK was insufficient to feed its entire population during that same period.²⁰

Further, “Kim sees his arsenal as an essential insurance policy against suffering the fate of Saddam Hussein, Moammar Gadhafi, and the Taliban leadership in Afghanistan in 2001.”²¹ Nuclear weapons serve three primary purposes for the DPRK; as a deterrent and a bargaining chip, both of which support the third purpose of strengthening the regime's credibility. There is no evidence to suggest the regime will have a different perspective if the U.S. fails to change its policy.

The first nuclear test conducted by the DPRK in 2006 was measured between 0.5-2 kilotons.²² The sixth and most recent nuclear test, conducted in 2017, measured over 140 kilotons.²³ If it is recognized that the Kim regime possesses nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them both regionally and against the U.S. homeland, an isolated DPRK that views the

¹⁸ Jean H. Lee, “Why Kim Jong Un Needs Nuclear Weapons” *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Policy Magazine*, May 6, 2016, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/05/06/why-kim-jong-un-needs-nuclear-weapons/>.

¹⁹ “Korea, North” *Central Intelligence Agency*, Accessed December 29, 2022, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/korea-north/#military-and-security>.

²⁰ “Korea, North.” *Central Intelligence Agency*, Accessed December 29, 2022, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/korea-north/#military-and-security>.

²¹ Michael E. O'Hanlon, “A Step-by-Step Plan for Denuclearizing North Korea” *Brookings*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/05/14/a-step-by-step-plan-for-denuclearizing-north-korea/>.

²² Missile Defense Project, “North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present”.

²³ Missile Defense Project, “North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests: 1984-Present”.

outside western world as a threat should be very concerning. Denuclearization rhetoric will continue to isolate the DPRK from the west. However, recognizing the DPRK as a de facto nuclear-capable state legitimizes the Kim regime on the world stage, and doing so has strategic benefits which may outweigh the alternative.

Alternatives to Denuclearization:

American policy must shift from denuclearization to limiting further nuclear development while publicly acknowledging the DPRK as a de facto nuclear-capable state. In doing so, the U.S. will legitimize the Kim regime, which may cause U.S. allies in the region to question American credibility. But, more importantly, recognizing a nuclear-capable DPRK may disincentivize further development because a threat to the survival of the Kim regime has been removed; one presumed goal of the nuclear program has been achieved. While denuclearization should remain a long-term goal, immediate efforts should limit further nuclear development and stabilize relations with the DPRK.

It should be assumed that Pyongyang desires to retain a certain quantity of nuclear warheads and the means to deliver them, which it deems a sufficient deterrent to threats against the Kim regime or territorial sovereignty. However, while the minimum deterrence threshold is unknown, the Kim regime may seek to capitalize on economic stimulus incentives made possible by relinquishing nuclear weapons in excess of the minimum deterrence threshold and ceasing further development. Historical precedence supports this assumption. While economic sanctions have failed to prevent the DPRK from achieving nuclear milestones, easing sanctions without oversight would likely accelerate the nuclear program. Therefore, any relaxation of current sanctions should only be entertained if verifiable limitations on further nuclear development can

be negotiated. This should include, at a minimum, cessation of further missile testing and granting unrestricted access to IAEA inspectors.

By recognizing the DPRK as a de facto nuclear state, previously closed diplomatic channels may be renewed, which can aid in stabilizing relations with the U.S. Further, the Kim regime may be motivated to negotiate the easing of economic sanctions in return for verifiable limitations on further nuclear development. Perhaps most importantly, negotiations concerning further nuclear development provide opportunities for cooperation, notably regarding nuclear safety. Avoiding a nuclear mishap at Yongbyon, like those experienced at the Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima nuclear plants, is in as much North Korea's interest as it is in the interest of the U.S., Japan, South Korea, and, critically, China.

Eyes Wide Open: the Ukraine connection and support from big brother

How does a country like the DPRK, isolated from almost the entirety of the outside world, achieve a credible nuclear weapons program despite withering sanctions and a failing economy? The answer sounds like a plot from a Tom Clancy novel. It involves espionage, the fall of the Soviet Union, and an unlikely, albeit unknowing, accomplice; Ukraine. According to Vasily Kashin, Director of the Center for Comprehensive European and International Studies at the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE), declassified KGB documents indicated North Korean scientific and technical espionage efforts in Ukraine date back to Soviet times.²⁴ While there is nothing to suggest that Ukraine deliberately sold the DPRK missile technology, says Kashin, he believes the flaws in the Ukrainian counter-intelligence

²⁴ Maxim Hvatkov, "Nuclear Family: How Ukraine Helped North Korea Develop the World's Deadliest Weapons" *RT International*, 1 July 2022, <https://www.rt.com/russia/558214-ukraine-helped-north-korea/>.

system were exploited.²⁵ However, there is another reason why Ukraine is significant to the DPRK; it is a cautionary tale for what happens to a country that relinquishes its nuclear weapons.

The Budapest Memorandum, signed by the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Russian Federation on December 5, 1994, pledged security assurances to Ukraine in return for joining the NPT as a non-nuclear-weapons state.²⁶ Notably, the agreement was broken by the Russian Federation in 2014 with the annexation of Crimea and again in 2022 with a full-scale invasion of eastern Ukraine. There are two lessons to be gleaned from the Ukraine situation from the perspective of the DPRK. First, the Kim Regime has reason to be distrustful of security assurances. Russia's actions toward Ukraine had demonstrated for a second time the willingness to renege on security promises; the first instance occurred after the fall of the Soviet Union when North Korea was left to fend for itself. Protection from powerful allies is not guaranteed. Therefore, an organic strategic deterrent must be maintained.

Second, nuclear weapons are potent deterrents to hostility and viable bargaining chips, two of the primary reasons the Kim regime is keen on developing them. Russia would likely not have been so brazen in Ukraine if reasonable certainty existed for nuclear escalation. Further, after the fall of the Soviet Union, both the Ukrainian and Soviet economies were in shambles. The U.S.-led disarmament program pumped hundreds of millions of dollars into Ukraine to relinquish the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal. The U.S. also paid Russia handsomely to dismantle the weapons and to use the uranium for power generation.

To accomplish its goals, Pyongyang follows a predictable pattern; "provoke when Washington or Seoul seem preoccupied, up the ante in the face of international condemnation,

²⁵ Hvatkov, "Nuclear Family: How Ukraine Helped North Korea Develop the World's Deadliest Weapons".

²⁶ Mariana Budjeryn and Matthew Bunn, "Budapest Memorandum at 25: Between Past and Future" *Harvard Kennedy School*, March 2020, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/budapest-memorandum-25-between-past-and-future>

and pivot back to a peace offensive, which usually ends with some form of dialogue and negotiation, culminating, finally, in concessions for the North.”²⁷ Recall that Pyongyang has benefited from U.S. concessions in exchange for progress toward denuclearization under Presidents Clinton and Obama. Additionally, while making no concrete assurances toward denuclearization, Kim Jong-Un benefitted in two significant ways when President Trump set foot on North Korean soil in 2019. As the first U.S. sitting president to visit North Korea, Kim Jong-Un was legitimized on the world stage. In doing so, global efforts to pressure Pyongyang to accept denuclearization were undermined.

But, perhaps the most significant reason the North won’t relinquish its nuclear weapons peacefully is that it feels it doesn’t have to. The Kim regime will view any armed preemptive action to forcefully remove nuclear weapons as an open declaration of war and draw China into hostilities under Article II of the 1961 Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. Additionally, among other assurances, the treaty pledges “non-interference in each other’s internal affairs.”²⁸ “China’s superpower support — which has saved North Korea once before through its intervention in the Korean War — plays a crucial role in balancing against the U.S.’s regional alliances with Japan and South Korea.”²⁹ While skeptical of security assurances, the Kim regime is betting that the U.S. will refrain from military action regarding denuclearization to avoid a conflict with China and, therefore, enjoys relative freedom to develop a sizeable nuclear arsenal under the assumed protection of a Chinese umbrella.

²⁷ Sue Mi Terry, “North Korea’s Strategic Goals and Policy towards the United States and South Korea” *International Journal of Korean Studies*, 2, XVII (2013). p. 63.

²⁸ Transcribed by B. Max and Mike B., “Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance between the People’s Republic of China and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea” *Peking Review* 4, no. 28 (1967), https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/documents/china_dprk.htm.

²⁹ James Fretwell, “Friends Forever? the China-North Korea Defense Treaty Turns 59” *North Korea News*, September 3, 2020, <https://www.nknews.org/2020/07/friends-forever-the-china-dprk-defense-treaty-turns-59/>.

The Cost of Denuclearization: It Depends.

The actual cost of denuclearization is difficult to quantify. Not least because the definition of denuclearization isn't straightforward and depends on the perspective. For example, denuclearization could mean the cessation of testing and placing a cap on the North Korean nuclear arsenal, verifiable disarmament, or removing the threat of a nuclear attack on the U.S. homeland. Complete denuclearization sounds self-explanatory to the casual observer of President Biden's policy. But, even if taken at face value, denuclearization isn't a switch that can be flipped. It is the objective of a long, arduous, and costly process comprised of unilateral and multilateral efforts.

There aren't many examples that can be used as precedents for when a state gave up weapons of mass destruction. Those that relinquished their weapons did so under varying circumstances and aren't perfect comparisons to North Korea, but Ukraine is probably the closest. Monetarily, the U.S. gave Ukraine approximately \$330 million for dismantling 1800 nuclear warheads and another \$700 million as part of an economic aid package.³⁰ An additional \$60 million was paid to Russia for removing the highly enriched uranium (HEU) from the warheads, 16 percent of which was paid to Ukraine as compensation for enriching the uranium in the first place.³¹

The cost of the diplomatic effort of denuclearizing Ukraine is far more challenging to estimate. The process lasted approximately five years and was initially negotiated as part of the Lisbon Protocol in 1992, a multilateral agreement between Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and the U.S. By signing the Protocol, Ukraine agreed to assume the same

³⁰ Nadia Schadlow, "The Denuclearization of Ukraine: Consolidating Ukrainian Security" *Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute*, 1996. p. 279, 282.

³¹ Schadlow, p. 276, 281.

obligations as the former U.S.S.R. under the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START)³² and adhere to the provisions outlined in the NPT. Top diplomatic considerations included verifying adherence to the terms of START through oversight and inspections, non-proliferation, and expedience. The process was long and far from a sure bet. Like the DPRK, the Ukrainians also realized the potent deterrence of nuclear warheads and the leverage they provided at the bargaining table. They, too, had their national security to worry about.

Regarding the DPRK, “given the uncertainties involved, most analysts are reluctant to be more specific than to predict costs for denuclearization running into billions of dollars.”³³ The diplomatic efforts would likely be far greater too. Ukraine was motivated to nurture diplomatic relations with the U.S. as a new independent state. At present, the DPRK is not. Further, the U.S. failure to prevent the DPRK from obtaining nuclear weapons calls credibility amongst its allies into question. Maintaining allied support is a precondition for the success, albeit relative, of economic sanctions. Perhaps the most significant diplomatic challenge is the giant dragon in the room, China.

The Global Times published an editorial that stated, “As soon as North Korea complies with China’s declared advice and suspends nuclear activities... China will actively work to protect the security of a denuclearized North Korean nation and regime.”³⁴ Interestingly, Kim Jong-Un has ignored the advice of his principal ally. Perhaps he is signaling an awareness that alliances are a means to an end, and the DPRK will provide for its own protection. Further, while it was crucial when nuclear capabilities were being developed, the Treaty of Friendship,

³² Schadlow. p. 274.

³³ Francois Murphy, “Explainer: What Will It Cost to Denuclearize North Korea?” Edited by Mark Heinrich, *Reuters*, June 29, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-nuclear-cost-explainer-idUSKBN1JP1LD>.

³⁴ James Fretwell, “Friends Forever? the China-North Korea Defense Treaty Turns 59”.

Cooperation and Mutual Assistance may be less critical in the future. This should be concerning to both the U.S. and China.

One strong correlation between Ukraine, during the period of denuclearization, and the DPRK is the state of their failing economies. Michael E. O'Hanlon of the Brookings Institution has identified a four-step process for denuclearizing the DPRK; freeze testing, cap arsenals, dismantling infrastructure, and disarm.³⁵ U.S.-led diplomatic efforts should focus on the verifiable cessation of testing and capping the Kim regime's nuclear arsenal as near-term goals in exchange for economic stimuli. Economic aid could be constructed as a multi-lateral Sino-U.S. effort that can help stabilize relations, among other mutual benefits. Further, instead of sending excess nuclear warheads to Russia, as was the case with Ukrainian denuclearization, the U.S. could broker a deal to have them verifiably dismantled in China. The nuclear material might then be used for power generation in North Korea.

Denuclearization or bust:

Some might argue that the U.S. policy of denuclearizing the Korean peninsula should continue to avoid a nuclear arms race. "Scholars at the Brookings Institute warned of a strategic chain reaction which is triggering an arms race in South Asia."³⁶ Specifically, the Brookings Institute scholars were referring to the ambitions of China to keep up with U.S. nuclear capabilities, resulting in India attempting to match China, then Pakistan feeling compelled to counter India. Each state acts with mutual distrust of the other while increasing their respective nuclear arsenals to undetermined levels and eroding the pillars of the NPT (non-proliferation,

³⁵ Michael E. O'Hanlon, "A Step-by-Step Plan for Denuclearizing North Korea".

³⁶ Syed Mohammad Ali, "Nuclear Deterrence in South Asia" *The Express Tribune*, December 8, 2022, <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2390118/nuclear-deterrence-in-south-asia>.

disarmament, and peaceful uses of nuclear energy).³⁷ The deteriorating nature of U.S.-Sino relations also decreases the ability of either one to act as the arbiter of nuclear relations in the region.

Western allies in the region are currently protected under the U.S. nuclear umbrella, predicated by allies believing the U.S. can do what it says it can do. Dependence on the U.S. for nuclear deterrence implies that Washington has the lead in shaping regional policy amongst its allies. Recognizing North Korea as a nuclear-capable state, even a de facto one, significantly weakens U.S. credibility. The policy shift could be viewed as waning U.S. influence and compel non-nuclear states like Japan and South Korea to pursue military independence from the U.S., or worse, their own nuclear capability. This may already be happening. Japan recently approved an unprecedented 26.3 percent increase in military spending for fiscal year 2023.³⁸ A nuclear Japan or South Korea is inherently destabilizing because each country will be less dependent on the U.S. for protection and less likely to follow its advice in pursuit of individual national security objectives.

However, these arguments are short-sighted. Nuclear weapons in the DPRK are essentially an open secret and an inconvenient truth. Milestone after nuclear milestone was achieved despite historic sanctions and united international efforts to put maximum pressure on Pyongyang.³⁹ The U.S. should show strength by acknowledging North Korea as a de facto nuclear state and use the opportunity to diplomatically engage with them in addition to China

³⁷ U.S. Department of State, “Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”, <https://www.state.gov/nuclear-nonproliferation-treaty/>.

³⁸ Takahashi Kosuke, “Japan Approves 26.3% Increase in Defense Spending for Fiscal Year 2023” *The Diplomat.*, December 27, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/12/japan-approves-26-3-increase-in-defense-spending-for-fiscal-year-2023/>.

³⁹ Daniel Chaitin, “Nikki Haley: UN Security Council Approves ‘Historic’ New Sanctions on North Korea” *Washington Examiner*, April 9, 2018, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/nikki-haley-un-security-council-approves-historic-new-sanctions-on-north-korea>.

and regional allies. Collective efforts should focus on two short-term objectives: limiting further nuclear development by the cessation of testing and placing a cap on the current arsenal. A diplomatically engaged nuclear North Korea is better than the alternative, an isolated nuclear state with hostile intentions toward the west.

Concluding Thoughts:

Recognizing North Korea as a de facto nuclear state provides the opportunity for diplomatic relations where none currently exist. Doing so will cause the credibility of the U.S. to be questioned among its allies. But the nuance between acknowledging a de facto capability and officially recognizing it is an essential diplomatic distinction. Any damage to the U.S. alliance structure in the region would be short-lived if negotiations with Pyongyang yielded fruit in the near term. The U.S. should also take the opportunity to address denuclearization policy failures with regional allies. While denuclearization should continue to be a long-term goal of U.S. foreign policy, it should not be the obstacle preventing diplomatic dialogue.