



## **What to do about North Korea?**

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### **Abstract**

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Amidst rising tensions on the Korean Peninsula and Pyongyang's persistent aggression particularly against the United States and its regional allies, the pressure on the Trump Administration is rising to address the threats emanating from the socialist regime and respond with more than just words and public condemnation. This paper examines four basic options for the US government with regards to the North Korean belligerency: pre-emptive attack, tightening screws, decapitation strike, acceptance. It finds that the four unilateral options outlined are anything but attractive for the US given either the very high costs of a potential military encounter or the final establishment of North Korea as an acknowledged nuclear power. Instead, a fifth approach is proposed that seeks to employ a non-military digital strategy for the impairment of the Kim regime. This strategy aims to strengthen efforts to inform the isolated North Korean population more broadly about developments outside the socialist barbed wire and thus help to debunk the lies and 'fake news' of their own government. This would mean to strike the Kim regime at its perhaps most important spot: the currently infinite confidence in the wisdom of the 'Supreme Leader', North Korea's high development status, and the historic mission of its people in the defense of their socialist system.

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## Analysis

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The tragic death of American Otto Warmbier after his imprisonment in a North Korean penal camp for 15 months worsened the already tense relations between Pyongyang and Washington. Warmbier was taken into custody in January 2016 after a prank, shortly before his scheduled departure from North Korea, and then sentenced to 15 years in prison in a show trial. After the socialist Kim regime released a comatose Warmbier to American public officials, doctors in Cincinnati concluded that there was no chance of recovery. The young man died surrounded by his family, his death the likely result of sustained torture, forced labor and malnutrition experienced during his incarceration.

Already now, shortly after his death, both family members and high-ranking American politicians like Senator John McCain speak of a murder that has to be accounted for by the North Korean government. The deep sympathy shown by the American people towards Warmbier's fate, as well as the Kim regime's unending tests of missile in order to gain a reliable capacity to strike against the US and Pyongyang's aggressive, anti-Western rhetoric, puts US-President Donald Trump under immense pressure to respond to the threat emanating from North Korea's government with more than just words and public condemnation.

### Trump's four options

Despite growing internal political pressure on Trump, it is yet unlikely that the administration – in contrast to its frequent use of unilateral force in Syria – will take any military action against Pyongyang. As author and writer Marc Bowden so aptly argued<sup>1</sup>, the Trump administration has four basic options in dealing with the Kim regime: 1. Pre-emptive attack, 2. Tightening screws, 3. Decapitation strike, 4. Acceptance. Closely examining all four scenarios is worthwhile to gain some insight as to how the confrontation on the Korean peninsula may play out.

#### Option 1: Pre-emptive attack

Without any doubt, the United States would be able to defeat the Kim regime militarily in a conventional war. However, this would result in the costliest US military action since the end of World War II, as North Korea's military itself has been significantly upgraded; according to international estimates<sup>2</sup>, Pyongyang has over a million soldiers at arms, accompanied by more than eight million reservists, and paramilitaries with highly motivated and well-trained elite troops. With an estimated 180,000 members, the North Korean military roughly equals the shrunken German *Bundeswehr* of today.

The military of the 'Supreme Leader' Kim Jong-un, who became North Korea's head of state at the age of only 27 in 2011, also has very large supplies of chemical and biological warfare agents, among them the highly toxic sarin and VX nerve gas. Moreover, the North Korean arms industry made significant progress in the construction of nuclear weapons and the corresponding missile delivery systems. Recently, North Korea successfully tested its first ICBM, the Hwasong-14, which is presumably capable of flying as far as Europe or Alaska.<sup>3</sup> This came after missile tests repeated failed, likely because Washington has been engaged in a

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<sup>1</sup> Bowden, Marc (2017): 'How to Deal with North Korea', *The Atlantic*, July/August 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/the-worst-problem-on-earth/528717/>

<sup>2</sup> Cordesman, Anthony (2016): 'The Conventional Military Balance in the Koreas and Northeast Asia', *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, p. 65-67, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/conventional-military-balance-koreas-and-northeast-asia>

<sup>3</sup> BBC (2017): 'North Korea Hails 'ICBM Test' Success', 04. July 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40491138>



cyberwar with the Kim regime over the last three years.<sup>4</sup> This has delayed the program to a certain extent, yet Pyongyang itself has likewise heavily invested in beefing-up its cyber capacities over the last two decades. Pyongyang's current level for cyber war and cyber criminality is grave enough to be labelled as a "cyber actor of greatest concern"<sup>5</sup> next to Russia, China, Iran and Islamic terrorist groups in a recent report by the Defense Science Board of US Department of Defense (DOD). Indeed, it is more than likely that the Kim regime would use the rising cyber capacities at its disposal (much of it concentrated in the secretive Bureau 121, the Cyber Warfare Guidance Bureau and a special cell called Unit 180)<sup>6</sup> in order to create havoc in the region and abroad by the attacking critical infrastructure of its opponents in case of war. Still, while acknowledging steady North Korean progress on cyber capabilities, the renown IT security expert Bruce Schneier nevertheless notes that North Korea is until now "not in the same league as the US, UK, Russia, China, and Israel"<sup>7</sup>.

While developing strong cyber capacities is seen in Pyongyang as an important low-budget, low-risk and low-intensity means to steal money, terrorize political opponents, potentially disrupt other countries' critical infrastructures (and fend off Western cyber-attacks) as well as continually trying to upset the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, the regime's primary goal nevertheless is to be accepted as a nuclear power as this is perceived to be the only way to ensure regime survival. The last of five nuclear weapons tests took place in September 2016. David Albright from the Institute for Science and International Security in Washington estimates that North Korea possessed between 13 and 30 nuclear weapons by the end of 2016.<sup>8</sup> It remains unclear whether the Kim regime has already been successful in miniaturizing them for use as warheads on their ICBMs. Constructing a nuclear bomb is both expensive and complicated, and even more so is miniaturizing them to be fitted to a warhead. Still, experts such as Siegfried Hecker of Stanford University estimate that North Korea is likely to possess intercontinental missiles equipped with nuclear warheads between 2021 and 2026, which would enable them to reach the US mainland.<sup>9</sup> Although the question remains how much progress the Kim regime will be able to make in miniaturizing some of its nuclear bombs, those missiles that are already available are able to reach (aside from China and Russia) close US allies like South Korea and Japan, and therefore threaten these countries' civilian populations with missile strikes, including the densely populated metropolitan areas of Tokyo (38 million inhabitants) and Seoul (over 25 million citizens).

### Great damage through rocket launchers

Particularly for South Korea a military conflict with the North is highly unattractive as its capital Seoul, the political and economic heart of the country, lies within close reach of North Korean conventional artillery. Additionally, many other South Korean cities close to the demilitarized zone – the 250 kilometer-long no man's land dividing the two countries since 1953 – would be afflicted by such retaliatory strikes from the North. And

<sup>4</sup> Sanger, David E./Broad, William J. (2017): 'Trump Inherits a Secret Cyberwar Against North Korean Missiles', *The New York Times*, 4. March 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/04/world/asia/north-korea-missile-program-sabotage.html>

<sup>5</sup> US DOD Defense Science Board (2017): *Task Force on Cyber Deterrence*, February 2017, [http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2010s/DSB-CyberDeterrenceReport\\_02-28-17\\_Final.pdf](http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2010s/DSB-CyberDeterrenceReport_02-28-17_Final.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Park, Ju-min/Pearson, James (2017): 'Exclusiv: North Korea's Unit 180, the Cyber Warfare Cell hat Worries the West', Reuters, 21 May 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-cyber-northkorea-exclusive-idUSKCN18H020> and Jun, Jenny/LaFoy, Scott/Sohn, Ethan (2015): *North Korea's Cyber Operations: Strategy and Responses*. September 2015, p. 4, [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/151123\\_Cha\\_NorthKoreaCyber\\_handout\\_final.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/151123_Cha_NorthKoreaCyber_handout_final.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Schneier, Bruce (2017): 'North Korean Cyberwar Capabilities', *Schneier on Security*, 22. May 2017, [https://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2017/05/north\\_korean\\_cy\\_1.html](https://www.schneier.com/blog/archives/2017/05/north_korean_cy_1.html)

<sup>8</sup> Albright, David (2017): 'A Freeze of North Korea's Nuclear Program: Finding a Definition More Fitting of Today's Reality', *Institute for Science and International Security*, 13. June 2017, <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/a-freeze-of-north-koreas-nuclear-program-finding-a-definition-more-fitting/10>

<sup>9</sup> Hecker, Siegfried (2016): 'What's to Make of North Korea's Latest Nuclear Test?', *38North*, 12. September 2016, <http://www.38north.org/2016/09/shecker091216/>



any clash between the two large Korean standing armies would lead to extensive military operations and heavy losses on both sides, especially among the civilian population; South Korea has some 600,000 soldiers and over three million reservists arrayed against the almost nine millions soldiers and reservists at North Korea's disposal mentioned earlier.

According to a *Stratfor* analysis, a single volley of all North Korean Type KN-09 rocket launchers could cause as much damage as eleven fully laden B-52 bombers of the US air force.<sup>10</sup> Other studies estimate that there could potentially be more than 100,000 victims in Seoul alone within the first 48 hours of a war.<sup>11</sup> These estimates, however, are based on the assumption that the North would *not* use any of the ABC weapons already at the disposal of the regime's armed forces. The number of victims of such a deployment would be considerably higher should it drag out. Should the Kim regime use its ABC weapons, millions of people would die within a few hours. Experts assume that the North Korean sarin gas stocks alone would claim between three and five million casualties.<sup>12</sup> A preemptive strike by the Trump administration could therefore (involuntarily) result in one of the largest mass killings of modern times, particularly because it is very unlikely that an American first strike would destroy large enough segments of Pyongyang's conventional artillery, its mobile missile systems and numerous ABC weapon depots. Even if it were successful, the US and South Korea would face highly fanaticized North Korean troops, who operate an extensive though often outdated stock of military equipment. The North has about 5,000 tanks, 4,000 armored vehicles, 2,250 self-propelled artillery, and 4,300 towed artillery. Though the North Korean air force is deficient, it has a well-equipped air defense, limiting the US air advantage and affecting US and South Korean military operations on land.

As the socialist country's founding myth is partly based on fighting (and winning) an ultimate battle against the US, military plans have been designed to withstand an extensive American attack, and to deliver a counter strike with ferocity. Even if a US pre-emptive strike completely eradicated all of the North's ABC weapons, paralyzed the North Korean artillery, swiftly defeated the army of millions of soldiers and reservists, and managed to rapidly oust the Kim regime (and even if these remarkable achievements were made without heavy casualties, and considerable materiel and infrastructure losses), the reconstruction of a war-damaged and impoverished North Korea would still be an enormous humanitarian challenge by far exceeding that of rebuilding Iraq after the 2003 war. This is also based on the assumption that Beijing and Moscow would not intervene, and willingly leave the reconstruction to Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo; given China and Russia's regional interests, this would be highly unlikely. Moreover, the Kim regime, threatened in its very political existence and fighting for survival, might resort to a locally limited use of nuclear weapons, either in the hope of achieving a decisive victory to repel the US, or in a cynical scorched-earth strategy to prolong its existence. The consequences of a pre-emptive conventional strike by Washington against Pyongyang present staggering costs that far outweigh the benefits, rendering it an unappealing strategic and political option.

## Option 2: Tightening screws

The second option identified by Bowden comprises stronger political and especially direct military responses to future provocations from North Korea such as nuclear device testing or missile launches above South Korea or Japan. Washington could, for example, respond by performing limited precision strikes against North Korean

<sup>10</sup> Stratfor (2017): 'How North Korea Would Retaliate', 05. January 2017, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/analysis/how-north-korea-would-retaliate>

<sup>11</sup> Gady, Franz-Stefan (2017): 'What Would the Second Korean War Look Like?', *The Diplomat*, 19. April 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/what-would-the-second-korean-war-look-like/>

<sup>12</sup> Bowden (2017).



missile launch grounds or against nuclear research centers concerned with developing components for the bomb program. In response to likely retaliatory strikes from North Korea, the US could likewise gradually escalate and, in doing so, initiate a stimulus-response pattern, or 'provocation cycle', a term coined<sup>13</sup> by North Korea expert Sydney Seiler.

With his approach of 'strategic patience', Obama had tried to avoid this very cycle in the hope that North Korea would evolve into a more responsible and calculable actor. Unfortunately, his hopes did not pay off. Why then should the new US president not tighten the screws and choose gradual escalation over de-escalation? The answer is simple: because a military escalation is difficult to end amid further hardening fronts. The uncertainty about the respective opponents' intentions increases significantly once the two sides have begun shelling. Besides the enormous risk of nuclear contamination for both the people and the environment in case of an attack on North Korea's nuclear industry, it is also unclear whether military strikes can be kept limited in time and place, or if they can be terminated at all.

In light of this situation, it is also doubtful whether Pyongyang would correctly interpret Washington's intentions regarding the limits of US strikes against North Korean troops and facilities and would not perceive them as an initiation of the extensive war the socialist leadership has been anticipating for half a century. Here, too, the enormous damage and costs described in the first scenario would also come into effect. Even if violence could remain restricted, however, Kim's dictatorial regime would likely be strengthened by military strikes, as it would mobilize more loyalty and internal support by benefiting from an accelerating siege mentality.

Furthermore, it is doubtful whether South Korean and US citizens would actually approve of a limited yet risky military engagement, an additional factor for consideration by the elites in Seoul and Washington. As Western governments know full well, in democratic societies fallen soldiers in zinc caskets can drain political capital fairly rapidly. In addition to this, the Kim regime might interpret a limited strike against his nuclear potential as evidence of a looming Western strategy to seek a regime change in North Korea. The case of Libya's dictator, Muammar al-Gaddafi, who was toppled with ample support by some Western countries' air forces in 2011, could thus serve as a cautionary tale for Kim. He might consequently react with more grimness and less conciliation in order to defend his recently gained status as a nuclear power. Compliance with Western calls for denuclearization, therefore, does not seem promising without also providing some credible security guarantees.

### Option 3: Decapitation strike

The third scenario aims at the military removal of Kim and his leadership circle from office. According to media reports<sup>14</sup>, some Western governments have considered such a strategy, where – similar to the Hollywood comedy "The Interview" – the dictator and his closest leadership ranks would be eliminated by a commando operation. Such an option would thus open the way for a North Korea freed from the Kim dynasty. This, however, is much easier said than done. Aside from the clear violation of international legal norms concerning the extrajudicial killing of foreign state leaders, the 'Supreme Leader' is enormously well protected, particularly at his rare public appearances. North Korea's strong air defense renders a drone or cruise missile attack unpromising, necessitating more direct access. This attempted attack is destined to fail without conspirators

<sup>13</sup> Bowden (2017).

<sup>14</sup> Hancocks, Paula (2016): 'South Korea Reveals it has a Plan to Assassinate Kim Jong Un', CNN, 23. September 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/23/asia/south-korea-plan-to-assassinate-kim-jong-un/index.html>



coming from his innermost ranks, even if an ultimately suicidal special unit would dare bearding the lion in his den. Kim's safety is ensured by Unit 963, a very well-equipped elite troop amounting to some estimated 120,000 men, which monitors everything and anything within Kim's surroundings. Moreover, shortly after Kim's inauguration he began eliminating cadres whose absolute loyalty was questionable. With this being the case, this scenario hardly looks promising.

Moreover, a failed assassination attempt would make a war with South Korea and the US practically unavoidable, as the US, whether justifiably or not, would likely be immediately branded as the perpetrator by North Korean officials. The Kim regime would react with brute force against regional US assets and further military aggression against US allies. Even if an assassination of Kim and his most loyal supporters would be successful, it remains unclear whether the North Korean elites would crown a successor that neighboring states would consider to be more benign and open for talks regarding the country's denuclearization. Moreover, the risk of an immediate military escalation by North Korea against its southern neighbor and the US would remain. This would likely be prompted by sections of the North Korean forces and political cadres who are exceptionally close to the 'Supreme Leader' and would aim to illustrate their grief and anger with retaliatory strikes against South Korea and US military bases within the region. The killing of Kim by Washington, Seoul or other actors could therefore potentially cause precisely what it was supposed to prevent: an open war on the Korean peninsula.

#### Option 4: Acceptance

If neither a strategic miscalculation nor a deliberate escalation leads to war, and if Kim Jong-un is not replaced by a new leader less focused on establishing North Korea as a nuclear power, it is quite likely that Pyongyang will develop intercontinental missiles with nuclear warheads able to reach Northern America and Western Europe within the coming decade. This is the most likely scenario according to Bowden, especially due to the socialist dictatorship's diplomatic intransigence and the poor options available to other countries to stop such a development. As has been described, North Korea has already acquired the potential to cause massive destruction in its immediate neighborhood via biological and chemical weapons and it has recently successfully tested a missile that is likely capable of flying as far as Europe and Alaska. Up to now the regime has used threats and provocations, but has fortunately rarely taken action. Incidents like the still-controversial scuttling of the corvette *Cheonan* in March 2010 or the shelling of the South Korean island *Yeonpyeong* in November 2010 are some of the few exceptions.

Despite all its aggressive gestures and sizeable military power, North Korea would be more than likely to ultimately lose an all-out war, thus making it unlikely that the Kim regime would purposely initiate steps to start one. Militarily and in terms of regional partners, Washington is simply too far ahead. Moreover, Beijing has already indicated to Pyongyang that it would not feel bound by the 1961 Mutual Support Treaty in case North Korean actions trigger a war. (The diplomatic tensions between both states are also exemplified by the fact that neither Xi Jinping nor Kim Jong-un have visited the other country so far.)

A North Korean nuclear attack against Seoul or Tokyo would moreover likely trigger nuclear retaliations by Washington, as the US has committed to protect its allies via bilateral agreements under what is called a 'nuclear umbrella'. As a consequence, North Korea would be transformed into a nuclear desert should it deploy nuclear weapons; the Kim dynasty would be history. This, for sure, is not how the 'Supreme Leader' wants to end his reign.



While it is not absolutely certain that the US would automatically and immediately respond to a nuclear attack by North Korea against regional US allies with its own nuclear strike, it is highly likely that the North Korean regime would cross a tipping point with such behavior and thus make the leadership's removal from power the ultimate objective not only for Western countries, but also for Russia and China. The Kim dynasty's days would essentially be numbered, as a loose nuclear middle power poses a major threat to all great powers. Without any doubt, Beijing and Moscow would want to have a say in the restructuring of the Korean peninsula, but they would likely not fundamentally oppose a military strike against Pyongyang. Kim, therefore, has multiple incentives not to rush to extremes.

Instead, he may be tempted to implement a nuclear balance of terror. Even though Washington already provides his partners with modern defense systems today in order to increase the likelihood of fending off a North Korean nuclear first strike via sophisticated systems like THAAD, Aegis or PAC 2 & 3, Pyongyang still searches for means to overcome these obstacles. Should the North succeed technologically and demonstrate its respective potential to overcome anti-missile systems in credible ways, a political situation mirroring that of the Cold War would be created, where the two super powers put the other's existence at risk in the event of a nuclear war.

There is no consensus among political scientists whether such a situation, which was aptly labeled MAD for 'mutual assured destruction', and its inhumane logic of hostage-taking of the opposing civilian population automatically has stabilizing effects on the regional order and exercises moderating influences on nuclear-armed actors.<sup>15</sup> It would however be clear that North Korea could at least hit and devastate parts of the continental USA and, in doing so, create a new strategic balance between the two nations. A MAD scenario in which Washington and other countries would have to accept the establishment of North Korea as a new nuclear power seems today, however unpleasant, to be the most likely development.

This occurrence, however, would also set a dangerous pretext for other countries that have diplomatic tensions with the West and fear military intervention by Western powers.<sup>16</sup> Hardliners in Teheran, for instance, who fortunately lost the parliamentary election in February 2017 could hereafter reference Pyongyang's success (establishment as a nuclear state and hence enhanced security against an outside regime change) and could encourage Iranian nuclear armament in violation of prior agreements. Moreover, North Korea's move could in turn motivate more regional states to establish their own nuclear arsenals in order to hold leverage against blackmail by the Kim regime. Such a race for nuclear arms in the region with already some of the world's highest defense expenditures and a continuing security dilemma might lead to the end of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which North Korea left in 2003. The establishment of North Korea as a nuclear power would render it hard if not impossible to convince South Korea and Japan why they, in turn, should not be allowed to construct their own nuclear deterrence. While the acceptance of North Korea as a state owning nuclear weapons is, at first glance, the most probable of all presented scenarios, this very option could trigger the described regional and global efforts of armament, ultimately militarizing the Asia-Pacific even more.

<sup>15</sup> See for instance the intriguing debate in Sagan, Scott D./Waltz, Kenneth W. (2003): *The Spread of Nuclear Weapons. A Debate Renewed*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

<sup>16</sup> On the matter of military interventions see Neuhäuser, Christian/Schuck, Christoph (2017, eds.): *Military Interventions. Considerations from Philosophy and Political Science*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.



### A fifth option?

The US diplomat and academic James D. Bindenagel from the Center for International Security and Governance has pointed out that, given the muddled situation on the Korean Peninsula and the limited military options available to the West, it is now time for a focused diplomatic move.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, a diplomatic solution without the cooperation of Washington, Beijing, Moscow, Tokyo, and Seoul seems impossible, and the four unilateral options outlined above are likewise anything but attractive for Trump. Therefore, inquiry is needed as to whether other options to solve the North Korean crisis can be found in diplomacy.

The moment for a diplomatic concert of the regional powers would, at any rate, be convenient: in contrast to the six-party talks between the five countries and North Korea (suspended in 2006), where Moscow and Beijing more than once acted as protectors of the Kim regime, Russia's and China's interests in stopping North Korea's nuclear aspirations have grown considerably. Although their spheres of influence within North Korea are limited, both major powers have been losing their patience with the Kim regime for quite some time and might be convinced to strengthen North Korean denuclearization efforts. This is partly due to Japan and South Korea's habit of using provocations by North Korea as an excuse to increase their own military capabilities; a particularly worrisome development for China, as Tokyo and Seoul have become even closer security partners with the US over the past two decades.<sup>18</sup> Apart from a continual build-up of arms, the Japanese government, for instance, is now working toward amending section 9 of the Japanese constitution, which *de jure* prohibits the formation of regular armed forces and stands in some contrast with the *de facto* existence of a very formidable Japanese military.<sup>19</sup> This normalization of Japan as a regional middle power, as well as the stationing of the THAAD defense system in South Korea with its excellent radar system capable of tracking objects deep into Chinese territory concerns China, which feels encircled by US allies. Moreover, THAAD poses a risk for China's second-strike capability, something Beijing dislikes given the continuing tragedy of great power competition with Washington.<sup>20</sup> North Korea's provocations thus further enhance regional armament moves and adds to ongoing power competition.

### Strategic incentives to safeguard North Korea's political existence

China itself is responsible for an estimated 90 percent of North Korea's foreign trade. In addition to that, Beijing is bound to North Korea through an assistance treaty since 1961 which has been prolonged several times. While the treaty's duration is set to end in 2021, Beijing has already announced that it would not support Pyongyang in any war the regime starts. Importantly, an international diplomatic solution to the crisis on the Korean Peninsula is only feasible in cooperation with China, as Beijing still has a high strategic incentive to safeguard North Korea's political existence and can moreover spoil Western strategies that would endanger Chinese national interests. The Chinese leadership, however, is confronted with a dilemma: they are neither interested in an escalation of the complicated situation as it could quickly turn into a wildfire and thus impede China's rise as a great power, nor is Beijing willing to risk the collapse of their socialist neighboring country or accept a rash reunification with South Korea. While the former would lead to a humanitarian catastrophe

<sup>17</sup> Kim Jae-kyoung (2017): 'Moon Should Seek Bigger Role in N. Korean Resolution', *The Korea Times*, 10. June 2017, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2017/06/367\\_230955.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/biz/2017/06/367_230955.html)

<sup>18</sup> Fels, Enrico (2017): *Shifting Power in Asia-Pacific? The Rise of China, Sino-US Competition and Regional Middle Power Allegiance*. Cham: Springer, pp. 507-635.

<sup>19</sup> Reuters (2017): 'Japan's Abe to Push for Constitution Reform Before Year End – Media', 25. June 2017, <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-japan-constitution-abe-idUKKBN19G01H>

<sup>20</sup> Allison, Graham (2017): *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Hartcourt.





resulting in millions of people fleeing from misery and oppression into a much more prosperous and also liberal China, the latter could bring US troops right to the Chinese border as it is improbable that Seoul would swiftly abandon its security partnership with Washington in the event of a reunification. Both developments would be highly unappealing for Beijing.

The elimination of Sinophile cadres under Kim Jong-un, meanwhile, has significantly weakened Chinese influence in North Korea. The motivation to reconstruct this influence could be utilized to organize a common approach in the context of a concerted diplomatic move of all five countries explicitly not aiming at the political dissolution of the North Korean state and thus accommodating a vital concern of Beijing. Though this postponement of the long-awaited reunification of both Koreas for the time being might be to the dislike of large segments of South Korean society, accepting this constraint would allow to go ahead with a concerted move of all major countries relevant for addressing the North Korean bellicosity. Moreover, a diplomatic approach is very much preferable to both a military escalation and a Kim regime armed with nuclear-tipped ICBMs.

### **What to do? Bring more reality to North Koreans**

The great political theorist Hannah Arendt once cautioned against the loss of reality, as this poses a much greater risk to modernity than the allure of nationalist and racist ideologies. Through a lack of reality, Arendt argued, everything can become possible, i.e. illusions can be seen as authentic truths. The restoration of reality would be what a digital strategy for the impairment of the Kim regime would aim at. In this manner, the affected neighboring countries could use non-government organizations (NGOs) to strengthen their efforts in informing the isolated North Korean population more broadly about developments outside the socialist barbed wire and thus help to debunk the lies and ‘fake news’ of their own government. This new knowledge and the related long-term accumulation of public discontent with an information infrastructure that opposes the official propaganda would target the ideological ties between leadership and society and would work towards steadily weakening the propaganda-driven loyalty of the people to their ‘Supreme Leader’. The North Koreans would, on the one hand, be more broadly informed about the absurdity of official announcements and, on the other hand would become more aware of their meagre living conditions in a socialist economy of scarcity, especially in contrast to their South Korean relatives. The history of political discontent in East Germany, Poland and other countries behind the Iron Curtain has shown how important alternative sources of information both for challenging the lies of the national leaderships and for experiencing the different living conditions between people in the East and West can be.

### **Striking the Kim regime at its presumably most important spot**

Apart from an ongoing expansion of existing media programs in Korean language for a North Korean audience (Free North Korea Radio or Radio Free Asia, for instance), storage media in particular could play a vital role in challenging the Kim regime. USB flash drives and SD memory cards are already used today to satisfy the demand for South Korean, Chinese, and US serials and feature films within the North Korean population, despite the severe punishments imposed when caught, which according to some media reports could even let



to the death sentence as recently as 2014.<sup>21</sup> According to a 2014 United Nations report by a commission investigating the human rights violations in North Korea, witnesses from North Korea reported that the “minimum punishment for those found to have watched South Korean films or with South Korean films in their possession was a period in a labour re-education centre.”<sup>22</sup>

These very hard penalizations already indicate the high level of fear the regime has when it comes to the serious impact of outside knowledge on regime stability. It is because of this connection that David Slinn, Great Britain’s first ambassador in North Korea (2002 – 2006) is one of the best-known advocates of this digital anti-Kim strategy, through which, apart from entertainment products, political and educational e-books, documentaries and reports are also supposed to be spread amongst the North Korean population.<sup>23</sup> Since 2009, organizations like “Flash Drives for Freedom” have already been pursuing this goal with verve, though with very limited means.<sup>24</sup> Additional expenditures from the US, Japanese, and South Korean defense budgets could, in alternative to the acquisition of new military goods, in the future also be used to strike the Kim regime at its perhaps most important spot: the currently infinite confidence in the wisdom of the ‘Supreme Leader’, North Korea’s high development status, and the historic mission of its people – imputed with a notion of a particular racial purity – in the defense of the socialist system.

### Pressure on Beijing and Moscow

A weakened loyalty between the North Korean people and its authoritarian leadership obviously would not automatically lead to the North’s denuclearization. However, it could give fresh impetus to those public and elite Korean forces that hope for a different long-term development of their country (i.e. following for instance a Chinese path of ‘socialist’ development) and are not willing to support Kim’s confrontational course with the West. Obviously, for those disappointed and reform-oriented cadres, Beijing and Moscow, instead of Washington will be the more attractive cooperation partners. Washington, therefore, should maintain pressure on Beijing and Moscow to contribute to a more sustainable solution to the nuclear ambitions of North Korea, while also taking into account Chinese and Russian interests. For their part, China and Russia could openly tolerate or even actively support the smuggling of prepared data storage devices at their borders to North Korea in order to increase the pressure on the North Korean dictatorship. Digital devices could also help to spread Western anti-government software within North Korea and blind Pyongyang’s watchful eyes. IT specialists around Florian Grunow analyzed North Korean hardware and software and disclosed that the regime is capable of putting digital watermarks on files used on tablets and computers that operate a North Korean OS.<sup>25</sup> This not only allows for blocking software and files that have not gained the approval of the government, but also flags files with a digital watermark unique to the respective device and keeps track of opened files. While this violates users’ privacy rights, it more importantly allows to link respective users with content deemed undesirable by North Korean authorities. In order to reduce the high risks for North Koreans when

<sup>21</sup> Neuman, Scott (2014): ‘North Korean Officials Reportedly Executed for Watching Soap Operas’, *NPR*, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2014/10/29/359794444/north-korean-officials-reportedly-executed-for-watching-soap-operas>

<sup>22</sup> UN Human Rights Council (2014): Report of the Detailed Findings of the Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, p. 59. <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G14/108/71/PDF/G1410871.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>23</sup> Batchelor, Tom (2017): ‘Undermine North Korea’s Ambitions with pro-Western Propaganda, says Former Ambassador’, *The Independent*, 19. April 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/north-korea-kim-jong-un-nuclear-weapons-pro-western-propaganda-a7691661.html>

<sup>24</sup> <http://flashdrivesforfreedom.org>

<sup>25</sup> Grunow, Florian (2016): ‘Woolim – Lifting the Fog on DPRK’s Latest Tablet PC’, *Insinuator*, 28. December 2016, <https://insinuator.net/2016/12/woolim-lifting-the-fog-on-dprks-latest-tablet-pc/>



viewing either anti-Kim propaganda or South Korean soap operas, Western governments should thus also design and distribute software (via the distributed storage devices) that undermines Pyongyang's digital *Blockleiter* instruments. According to Grunow, it is technically feasible to create tools that protect people to safely use Western media in North Korea.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that there is no easy option for the denuclearization of North Korea and de-escalation of tension on the peninsula. The key to the impairment of the Kim regime, the build-up of an inner opposition and hence to a Pyongyang more willing to negotiate, however, could lie in the debunking of the 'fake news' and propaganda the North Korean government uses to control its own population. The particular appeal of a digital anti-Kim strategy lies not only in eschewing military action in light of the high costs associated with any military engagement, but also in its high cost-effectiveness: the digital hardware required is incredibly cheap. Given that the annual stationing costs for just a single US THAAD system in South Korea lies at about 20 million euros, the same amount of money would suffice, at least in terms of figures, to smuggle enough data storage devices into North Korea each year to theoretically reach every adult in this isolated land. For a businessman like Trump, who has promised his voters a balanced budget, this should be of interest not only on a strategic level.

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview with author, 25. July 2017.