

North Korea

A dangerous threat to the United States

by LtCol John W. Black

The Marine Corps is the United States' expeditionary force-in-readiness. As such, it is critically important for Marines to observe the operating environment and orient on threats to the United States' interests. One of the most dangerous threats facing the United States right now is the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (from now on referred to as North Korea). North Korea's development of offensive cyber, nuclear, and ballistic missile capabilities endangers the United States' homeland, threatens American interests, disrupts the balance of power in Northeast Asia, and disregards numerous United Nations (UN) Security Council resolutions. If left unaddressed, these North Korean capabilities may potentially plunge the United States into a state-on-state conflict or evolve into a wicked regional problem—both of which would have disastrous consequences globally. To reduce the chances of either of these things from happening, the United States has employed all elements of national power (diplomacy, information, military, and economic) to protect its interests and shape the actions of regional actors to maintain the stability and prosperity in Northeast Asia. This article will identify several dangerous threats originating in North Korea, identify ways the United States has adapted to these threats, and propose additional options the United States should consider to reduce and eliminate these threats.

In 2017, Secretary Mattis said, "North Korea is the most urgent and dangerous threat to U.S. national security,"¹ and this remains true today. In 2017, North Korea did several things that endangered U.S. interests and upset the balance of power in Northeast Asia. It detonated a hydrogen bomb with an estimated yield of approximately 100

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kilotons.² It fired 23 ballistic missiles, including an intercontinental ballistic missile (the Hwasong-15) that can range the entire United States and nearly every country in the world.³ It launched offensive cyberattacks, including the "WannaCry" cyberattack that crippled banks, companies, and hospitals across the globe.⁴ Kim Jong-un, the leader of North Korea, verbally threatened to attack the United States and three U.S. allies (South Korea, Japan, and Australia) in the Asia-Pacific region.⁵ Additionally, in October 2020, North Korea paraded four Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missiles on transporter erector launchers and a new nuclear-capable submarine-launched ballistic missile (the Pukgugkson-4).⁶ These actions and Kim Jong-un's fiery rhetoric pose a clear and present danger to the United States as well as its allies and partners. They also raise several questions. What would happen if North Korea effectively pairs its nuclear and intercontinental ballistic missile capabilities? Would it preemptively strike the United States or a U.S. ally? Most people assume "no, North Korea wouldn't do that." However, North Korean propaganda videos show nuclear devices exploding over Washington, DC.⁷ How has the United States adapted and responded to these provocative actions?

The United States has adapted and responded to these threatening developments by implementing a pressure campaign against North Korea.⁸ The pressure campaign has focused many elements of national power against

North Korea to protect U.S. interests in Northeast Asia and deter North Korean aggression. The United States has focused its elements of national power in the following ways:

Diplomacy. The diplomatic element of national power has been the most crucial element of the pressure campaign. The short-term political objectives are three-fold: deter North Korean aggression and provocation, stop North Korea's development and proliferation of nuclear weapon and ballistic missile technologies, and stabilize Northeast Asia. The long-term political objective is to denuclearize the Korean peninsula. To pursue these objectives, the United States has diplomatically engaged numerous countries and international stakeholders on a bilateral and multilateral basis.

The United States has attempted to rally and focus collective international action to accomplish these objectives. The United States has focused most of its diplomatic efforts on Japan, South Korea, China, Russia, and the UN, all of which are important partners in this complicated situation in Northeast Asia.

The United States has increased diplomatic visits and strengthened diplomatic relationships in Northeast Asia and within multinational forums.⁹ Since 2017, the President of the United States, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense have visited Northeast Asia, and the United States Ambassador to the UN has advocated for stronger international measures to force North Korean compliance of numerous UN

Security Council Resolutions concerning North Korea. Additionally, U.S. Embassies, Department of State's Bureau of East Asian and Pacific Affairs, and the DOD's U.S. Indo-Pacific Command personnel conducted numerous senior political-military-economic engagements with Northeast Asian leaders and stakeholders. These actions demonstrate that the United States desires to work by, with, and through allies, partners, and international community to maintain peace, prosperity, security, and stability. This collective approach may have been one of the primary reasons why the UN Security Council unanimously adopted several of the strongest resolutions in history, including banning North Korean exports, restricting fuel imports and trade, and reducing the ability of its citizens to work abroad.¹⁰

Information. The U.S. strategic communication campaign has promoted transparency and informed countries of U.S. concerns and policy intentions. The United States is concerned that North Korea intends to develop a nuclear ballistic missile capability, in violation of numerous counter proliferation treaties and UN Security Council resolutions, and use that capability to strike the U.S. homeland or U.S. allies. This concern may be understood by watching one of the many North Korean propaganda videos that shows a North Korean nuclear missile striking Washington, DC, or by listening to North Korean news agencies that vow to unleash an "unimaginable strike at an unimaginable time [on the United States]."¹¹ To ensure the international audience understands U.S. concerns and intentions, the United States has strategically communicated several messages: "The U.S. cannot allow a nuclear-armed North Korea," "If other countries won't solve the North Korean problem, America will," "All options (including military ones) are on the table,"¹² and "A threat to America or its allies will trigger a massive military response." The United States has also reiterated it will use military force if diplomatic solutions fail to achieve the desired political objectives. The United States is not willing to endanger the U.S. homeland or U.S. allies.

Economically. In support of UN Security Council resolutions, the United States has aggressively pursued the implementation and enforcement of economic and financial sanctions on North Korea. Sanctions have done the following: banned the import of arms, dual-use technology, industrial machinery, luxury goods, metals, military equipment, natural gas, transport vehicles; imposed sanctions and frozen assets on people, firms, and ships involved in the development of North Korea's nuclear program; limited the import of oil and refined petroleum

States with credible military operations should diplomatic and other options fail. It is evident from the information above that the U.S. pressure campaign is comprehensive, but it does not answer the question, "what next?"

The United States (in conjunction with South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia) must decide if it will or will not accept or allow a nuclear-armed North Korea. If it does accept a nuclear-armed North Korea, perhaps it is time for South Korea and Japan to become nuclear nations as well. If the United States does not allow a nuclear-armed

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products; banned the export of electrical equipment, coal, minerals, seafood, food and agricultural products, wood, textile, and earth and stones; limited the export of agricultural, labor, and metal exports; and restricted fishing rights.¹³ The United States has called on other countries to implement and enforce sanctions, but two countries in Northeast Asia (China and Russia) have not fully enforced the sanctions yet.

Military. The U.S. military has remained postured in and forward deployed to Northeast Asia to deter aggression, assure U.S. allies and partners, protect U.S. interests, and respond to crises. In response to North Korean provocations, the United States has forward deployed numerous advanced military capabilities to the Asia-Pacific region, including three Carrier Strike Groups, Aegis-equipped cruisers and destroyers, submarines, B-1/2/52 strategic bombers, F-22 and F-35 fifth-generation aircraft, Terminal High Altitude Area Defense Batteries, and Amphibious Ready Groups/MEUs. These capabilities provide the United

North Korea, then the United States must escalate. The United States can escalate with diplomatic, economic, and military elements of national power. Possible courses of action include the following:

Diplomacy. The United States in conjunction with the UN and global/regional actors could deliver and enforce harsher sanctions, approve the denuclearization of North Korea, and (if North Korea refuses to denuclearize) authorize the use of force to impose the denuclearization of North Korea. Ideally, authorization of the use of force would include broad international support and the fielding of a multinational force to support the denuclearization of North Korea. If there were not broad international support, the United States would have to determine whether or not it should employ unilateral actions to protect the homeland and U.S. interests.

Information. The United States should continue to communicate it does not desire regime change—just the removal or destruction of capabilities that threaten U.S. security. The United

States should continue to communicate to the primary regional stakeholders, especially North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia, that it desires a diplomatic solution but will resort to a military solution if diplomacy fails.

Economically. Harsher sanctions (from other global/regional actors) could include the severing of economic ties (including the full cut of oil imports) with North Korea, the freezing of North Korean bank accounts and financial transaction, the forced closure of joint venture companies, the forced

In the final analysis, it is evident that North Korea's development of offensive cyber, nuclear, and ballistic missile capabilities endangers the U.S. homeland, threatens American interests, disrupts the balance of power in Northeast Asia, and disregards numerous UN Security Council resolutions. The American pressure campaign has affected North Korea, but it has not achieved the designated objectives yet. To achieve those objectives, the United States must continue to work by, with, and through its allies and partners. If al-

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return/expelling of overseas North Korean workers, the severing of North Korean internet traffic, and increased isolation/embargo/sanction. The United States has largely maximized its economic pressure on North Korea. To generate additional economic pressure on North Korea, the United States would have to entice or negotiate that pressure from other actors—especially China and Russia.

Military. The military should continue to increase its readiness, improve its posture, and refine its plans to support the degradation and destruction of North Korean capabilities that endanger the U.S. homeland and interests. The military element of national power could be used to implement a naval blockade of North Korea. If North Korea detonates another nuclear device or launches another intercontinental ballistic missile, the United States could pursue the targeted destruction of North Korean military capabilities that endanger the Nation, U.S. allies and partners, and countries within the intercontinental ballistic missile engagement zone.

lies, partners, and international organizations like the UN cannot help achieve those objectives collectively, the United States may be forced to take unilateral action to protect the U.S. homeland and interests. That is where the U.S. military, including the Marine Corps, comes into play; we need to be the most ready when our Nation is least ready. We need to remain forward deployed and forward engaged: shaping, training, deterring, and responding to all manner of crises and contingencies, especially when deterrence fails.¹⁴

Notes

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