

The United States Must Meet The North Korean Threat

by Michael Curtis



On October 6, 2017 the Norwegian Nobel Committee awarded the Nobel Peace Prize of 2017 to the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN). The text of the award stated, "We live in a world where the risk of nuclear weapons being used is greater than it has been for a long time...there is a real danger that more countries will try to procure nuclear weapons, as exemplified by North Korea."

The world, most of all President Donald Trump but even China, is well aware of that particular danger. Trump has declared that "we cannot allow (Kim's) dictatorship to threaten our nation or our allies with unimaginable loss of life...the goal is denuclearization." But would the United States totally destroy North Korea to defend itself and allies? US policy makers are divided on the issue.

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, speaks of direct lines, a couple of direct channels, of communication with North Korea,

while President Trump appears to believe that it is a waste of time to try negotiating. This war of words may be undesirable, but both sides acknowledge that the use of a nuclear weapon by North Korea would start a war that it could not win and would lead to Kim's destruction, but one from which all would suffer.

Similarly, the world is aware that the North Korean nuclear arsenal is growing, and that its ballistic missile force is now a real danger. The country has conducted 6 ballistic nuclear tests, has a hydrogen bomb, and has intercontinental ballistic capability that can hit the western part of the U.S., and perhaps also Washington, D.C. and New York City.

Though there are legitimate differences of opinion on how to respond to North Korea's nuclear arsenal there are no differences about the dictator Kim Jong-Un, the ruler since he took power in 2011. He is a ruthless killer who has acted to consolidate power, murdering his uncle Jang Song Thaek, "a traitor for all ages," and ordering the assassination of his half-brother Kim Jong Nam in Malaysia. He acts to maintain his grip on power as well as to create a nuclear state. By one estimate he has executed 340 including 140 senior political and military officials.

Kim has used barbarous language, a substitute for physical execution, about American leaders. Most recently, Donald Trump is "mentally deranged and is a dotard" (September 22, 2017); Barack Obama was "reminiscent of a wicked black monkey," (2014); Hillary Clinton "sometimes looks like a primary schoolgirl and sometimes a pensioner going shopping," (July 23, 2009); George W. Bush was a "hooligan, bereft of any personality as a human being," (May 2005).

Others might disagree but US CIA sources hold that Kim is not crazy but a "rational actor," concerned with the survival of his regime. More likely, the unpredictable Kim wants to make North Korea a relevant player in international affairs,

respected for its military strength especially its nuclear strength, assert his equivalence with Donald Trump, and make North Korea a prominent issue at the UN General Assembly and other international meetings.

The present ruler's father Kim Il-Sung on becoming the ruler in 1972, wanted nuclear weapons from the start, built a nuclear research reactor in Yongbyon that could be a source of plutonium. At the time, both Russia and China denied him help in nuclear weapons. However, his nuclear program continued. In October 1994 North Korea signed an Agreed Framework, (AF) by which it would freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear program in exchange for receiving from the U.S. energy assistance in the form of heavy fuel oil and light water reactors. George W Bush referred to it as "a mistake." The Agreed Framework broke down in 2002 when it was found that North Korea had a highly enriched secret nuclear program, had bought technology and equipment abroad, and made secret deals with Pakistan. In January 2003 North Korea withdrew from the AF.

Russia got Kim to sign a nuclear proliferation treaty in 1985, but North Korea didn't give the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to Yongbyon, and was slow to fulfill the treaty. Again, in December 1991, North and South Korea agreed to a declaration for denuclearization of the Korean peninsula, and the North said it would agree to an inspections regime. But North Korea again cheated about its plutonium and refused to comply. It was hiding its nuclear program, it had bought technology and equipment abroad, and had made deals with Pakistan.

In response, sanctions were imposed by the US in the belief that only strong economic pressure can lead to a change in NK policy on nuclear weapons, and other programs. This is being done in spite of the fact that the NK 1972 constitution, amended in 2012, identifies the regime as socialist and revolutionary, a dictatorship of people's democracy, and as a

“nuclear armed state.”

It is too late and rather absurd to suggest the the problem of the Korean peninsula would be solved if it were given back to Japan. Another factor is that the 1953 armistice between the two Koreas that ended the Korean civil war has lasted for 64 years though Kim has renounced it, and declared that NK has a right to a preemptive nuclear weapon.

The international community sees NK as dangerous and provocative. What is to be done? There are four alternatives, if not real possibilities.

One is the removal of Kim, peacefully or not. Political peaceful procedures are not of course yet available in the country. But the use of force by the U.S. is unlikely for two reasons. The first is that assassination is not normal US procedure. The other realistic factor is that Kim is well protected and spends much time in underground facilities.

Second is the elimination of nuclear facilities, again, difficult, because much of NK facilities, and its important military infrastructure is underground. Moreover, NK has considerable military assets, especially artillery along the border with South Korea, and in event of hostilities NK could strike the 24,000 US troops in South Korea.

In any case is the US missile defense system, a mixture of the Patriot missiles, the terminal high-altitude area defense system (THAAD) and the aegis defense system, and the ground - based midcourse defense system, (GMD) able to destroy a NK nuclear warhead?

Third, is strengthening of sanctions by other states as well as the US. Sanctions have targeted institutions and people who are involved in developing and financing the weapon's programs, arms trade, human rights abuses, oil imports, violations of cyber security, limiting access to the international finance system, and entities that contribute to

the country's export earnings. These institutions and people cannot do business with the US and American companies. Ambassador Nikki Haley wanted the strongest possible sanctions, especially a complete oil embargo, and punitive measures against Kim. The UN resolution on the issue calls for a limit of imports of refined and crude oil to 8.5 million barrels a year; also, textiles, accounting for a quarter of NK export income, are banned.

China has been helpful to an extent: already it has up a system of inspectors and checkpoints, including the use of military dogs in an effort to close down NK smuggling routes, and had been admitting NK defectors.

Finally and fourth, what is left is diplomacy between NK and the US and rest of the world, and here Russia and especially China which must play a role as it has begun in imposing sanctions. Everyone knows that nuclear weapons pose a constant threat to humanity. The US has a prominent role in meeting that threat. Whether Kim is crazy or not, US actions should be doing the difficult thing right now. The impossible will take a little longer.