

Nuclear weapons dominate North Korea’s foreign and domestic policy; diplomatic engagement is the only way to encourage regime change.



Recent months have seen rising rhetoric between Washington DC and Pyongyang over North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. But why is the North Korean regime so keen on developing such weapons? [Vuk Vuksanovic](#) argues that for North Korea’s Kim Jong Un nuclear weapons act as a deterrent to international intervention, an instrument of foreign policy, and as a way of maintaining support domestically. With such a powerful pull, he writes, such weapons will not be easily given up by North Korea.

North Korea has been back in the news since [reports emerged](#) that the regime in Pyongyang was close to developing nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) able to hit the US. This news led to an [inflammable exchange of rhetoric](#) in which North Korean leader Kim Jong Un threatened to strike the US island territory of Guam, and to which President Donald Trump replied with a promise to Pyongyang that it would be met with “fire and fury”. Later on, North Korea fired a [missile over Japan](#) that crashed into the sea, which they then followed by [a hydrogen bomb test](#) considered by some to be the country’s most powerful so far. The threatening rhetoric has continued as Donald Trump in his speech to the UN General Assembly threatened to “[totally destroy](#)” North Korea, while North Korea’s Foreign Minister compared the US’ rhetoric with [the declaration of war](#). So why does North Korea want nuclear weapons? For the North Korean regime, nuclear weapons have three strategic functions, and with each one, the US is right in the center. Firstly, they serve as deterrent; secondly, an instrument of foreign policy; and thirdly, they are an instrument of domestic politics.

A hedge against international intervention

The first function of North Korea’s nuclear weapons is self-evident. Its leadership is faced with an adverse international system, in which the world’s preeminent power, the US, is focused on changing the regime in that country. Despite the fact that the US Secretary of State [Rex Tillerson](#) has denied this, Kim Jong Un can hardly take anyone’s word when it comes to his own survival. Indeed, cases of countries, which gave up on nuclear weapons only to become targets of great power interventions later on, such as [Ukraine](#) or [Iraq and Libya](#) can hardly be encouraging for Kim Jong Un. If we presume that the North Korean regime does not operate with a suicidal-apocalyptic tendency, as scaremongers proclaim, but on a [rational presumption](#) that every political regime wants to survive, first and foremost, then having nuclear weapons is its logical course of action. As the [international relations theory](#) teaches us, nuclear weapons remain the best safeguard against foreign invasion. The late legend of international relations theory [Kenneth Waltz](#) also considered North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons a reasonable strategy given that the regime’s biggest security concern is the possibility of US-led military intervention, in which Pyongyang would never stand a chance. The possibility that the Trump administration could undermine 2015’s negotiated [nuclear deal between Iran](#) and the international community is giving North Korean fears additional stimuli.

An instrument of foreign policy

The second function relates to the fact that unlike most countries that primarily view nuclear weapons as the means of deterrent, the regime in Pyongyang views them as an instrument of foreign policy. While [South Korea](#) has become one of the world's most advanced economies, the [North Korean regime](#) is one of the most isolated regimes with a backward economy. As such, if you are North Korea, being ignored by the international community is a very dangerous thing, given that with the passage of time, the chances for the collapse of the repressive isolated regime, with outdated ideology, unable to bring economic wellbeing to its citizens, increases. Instead, the nuclear weapons therefore provide leverage and a bargaining chip with the US that North Korea can employ when diplomatically interacting with more powerful and more successful actors, like the US and its ally South Korea. We have already seen this on the 14th of August 2017, when Kim Jong Un signaled [a pause](#) on the potential decision to strike Guam, leaving that way open space for talks, in which the Pyongyang regime could try to gain concessions from Washington.

There are numerous ways in which Pyongyang has been using nuclear weapons as a tool of political leverage. Even before becoming a nuclear state, Pyongyang has been using its nuclear program as a way of influencing the [US to relieve the extent of the sanctions it has imposed](#), which is a pattern of behavior dating back to the Clinton administration. One of Donald Trump's Tweets confirmed this when it asserted that the US has been paying [extortion money](#) to North Korea for the past 25 years.

The U.S. has been talking to North Korea, and paying them extortion money, for 25 years. Talking is not the answer!

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [August 30, 2017](#)

North Korea has also used its nuclear weapons tests as a bargaining chip in talks with the US, concerning the [humanitarian aid](#) badly needed by the North Korean populace. One of the "points" that Pyongyang scored in this area in the past was the February 2012 agreement known as "Leap Day" agreement. This agreement made with the Obama administration guaranteed that Pyongyang would refrain from testing nuclear weapons in exchange for food aid from the US. The regime in Pyongyang has also tended to [leverage](#) Washington and Seoul to give up on military drills that Pyongyang perceives as potentially threatening, in exchange for moratorium on nuclear tests. This bargaining worked for North Korea in 2015 and it could be potentially be effective now [amidst military drills by the US and South Korea](#). Threatening with nuclear weapons and the game of diplomatic trading with the US that North Korea puts in motion can also be used as a way to weaken or dilute [an alliance between Washington and Seoul](#). Ultimately, nuclear weapons talks might also be employed in the long run so that North Korea can get the diplomatic recognition and acceptance of its nuclear status, which is something that "[only Washington](#)" can provide.

Shoring up support at home

Last but not least, the North Korean regime uses its nuclear weapons as an instrument to strengthen itself domestically. There is a well-established assertion among [political science wonks](#) that the presence of an international threat boosts the cohesion of the state, while the absence of the threat brings the state's internal social and political divisions to the fore. Given the fear that isolated, economically deprived population could rebel against the regime, it is useful for Kim Jong Un to have an external enemy so that the country's population can rally around his strong leadership. The US is the perfect bogeyman for North Korea to strengthen social and political cohesion of its society and nuclear weapons are perfect way to generate faith among those living under the regime's rule. This pattern is evident from the [mass propaganda rally](#) on August 9th in Pyongyang. A series of similar, [anti-US propaganda rallies](#) have been taking place in North Korea as reaction to Trump's UN speech. Furthermore, despite the totalitarian character of North Korea's political system, Kim Jong Un also has to deal with domestic power brokers, convince them of his strengths and when necessary to eliminate any potential rivals. In one of the less dramatic analyses, [Kim Jong Un was described as the CEO](#) who has to ensure his shareholders and other board members that he is steering the company in the right way.



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For Kim Jong Un, nuclear weapons are a way to prove to his power entourage from the military and the Workers' Party of Korea that he is a strong leader and a worthy heir to his late father Kim Jong Il. Kim Jong Un already applied such strategy during [the plenary session of the Party Central Committee of 2013](#) where he promised that the regime would simultaneously concentrate on strengthening both the country's nuclear capability and its economic performance. [That entire period was also marked](#) by North Korean nuclear tests and verbal threats against the US and South Korea. The need for Kim Jong Un to remain strong is particularly acute given that his ascendance to power in 2012 was marked with [power struggle](#) entailing purges and dismissal of prominent party and army figures. Moreover, not even [his family](#) is immune from power struggles. Kim Jong Il had been appointed heir to his father Kim Il Sung after outmaneuvering other family members. In 2013, Kim Jong Un executed Jang Song-thaek, his own uncle, out of fear that he was too powerful. Most recently in 2017, Kim Jong Un's estranged half-brother Kim Jong Na was killed at the Kuala Lumpur airport, after being poisoned with a nerve agent. In such an environment, one cannot appear weak, and being in control of nuclear weapons is part of the game of controlling the internal power ranks.

Diplomatic engagement: playing the long game

Given that for the regime in Pyongyang, nuclear weapons are not just a guarantor of regime's survival but also a tool of power play in interacting with external power and domestic political players; it is highly unlikely that the regime will simply give them away despite pressures from the US. The military option for removing the weapons is not realistic, as it is dangerous and unreliable. Economic sanctions will also not remove nuclear weapons as one would have to enact enormous economic damage to the regime, which appears unviable, given that China will never go that far. Furthermore, states faced with security threats and challenges are willing to bear enormous economic sacrifice for the sake of their security interests. The only plausible option is to engage North Korea diplomatically, as it was done with Iran with participation of interested parties, in this case China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia. There are reasonable [skeptics](#) who believe that the approach which was effective with Iran will not work in case of North Korea, but it is better than the alternative of cornering a paranoid and erratic nuclear regime. This diplomatic engagement would not eliminate North Korean nuclear weapons, but it could be used to open up the country for foreign investment.

An economically opened North Korea that is simultaneously [exposed to the information influx from the outside world](#) would be more susceptible to gradual liberalization and perhaps a regime replacement someday. As Ian Bremmer satirically [tweeted once](#) “Cuba’s communism survived 50 years of sanctions. I doubt they can survive 5 years of Starbucks”. The same applies to North Korea. One thing is for certain, given the important roles that nuclear weapons play for Pyongyang, no other course of action seems viable.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USApp– American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

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