

Country Brief: North Korea

Takeaways

There are two essential issues in the US-North Korea relationship:

1. Ending the nuclear threat North Korea poses globally.
2. Ending the threat North Korea poses to its South Korean neighbors.

While President Trump claimed to deal with the nuclear threat by holding a historic summit with Kim Jong-un last summer, the agreement they signed was for show and has done nothing to change the threat North Korea poses. North Korea has continued to advance its nuclear weapons and missile programs since the summit was held. Now North Korea is insisting on another summit and, instead of refusing to capitulate to their demands, the Trump Administration has agreed to hold another summit in 2019.

Ultimately, negotiations with North Korea are the best way to reduce the threat the country's nuclear weapons pose to the United States and its allies in the long term. But given past experience, negotiations must produce specific, measurable, and verifiable reductions in North Korea's nuclear capability before further accommodations are made.

A smart and tough deal with North Korea would include:

- Specific and immediate steps to reduce and ultimately eliminate North Korea's inventory of long-range ballistic missiles capable of hitting parts of the United States;
- A path to reducing and eliminating their arsenal of nuclear weapons;
- A verification regime to ensure North Korea does not cheat on any deal, to counteract the country's long history of violating nuclear agreements; and
- Security guarantees coordinated with US allies, especially South Korea and Japan.

Unfortunately, President Trump played his hand poorly by doing four things that put the United States in a weak negotiating position before the June 2018 summit:

1. Lowering his opening bid for negotiations every time he talked about the summit;
2. Getting outfoxed by China, which was more prepared for the talks while President Trump seemed desperate for a signing ceremony;
3. Sowing chaos and confusion before negotiations even began; and
4. Alienating US allies who are critical to securing a deal with North Korea.

President Trump gave away a lot and gained nothing for the United States at his last summit with Kim Jong-un. While repeatedly fawning over him, Trump elevated the tyrant Kim on the world stage, claimed a victory lap for signing a weak and vague agreement that does little to address the nuclear threat from North Korea, and was outmaneuvered by China.

There are two essential issues in the US-North Korea relationship: 1. Ending the nuclear threat North Korea poses globally; and 2. Ending the threat North Korea poses to its South Korean neighbors.

North Korea has spent years developing and testing nuclear weapons that threaten the region, including our allies, South Korea and Japan. Now, thanks to advances in its ballistic missile technology, North Korea has a functional nuclear weapon and intercontinental ballistic missiles capable of striking parts of the continental United States.¹ Tensions between North Korea, the United States, and our allies have increased with the North's advancement of its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The situation is further complicated by the fact that North and South Korea technically remain at war after the Korean War ended only in an armistice. In addition to nuclear weapons, North Korea has packed enough conventional firepower on its border to destroy the South's capital, Seoul, in a matter of hours if active hostilities ever broke out.² It also has a large arsenal of chemical and biological weapons. A war on the Korean Peninsula could lead to the deaths of millions of people on both sides of the border, including possibly hundreds of thousands of Americans.³ To quell this threat, it must be dealt with through negotiations to denuclearize North Korea.

President Donald Trump met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un in Singapore on June 12, 2018. This was the first time a sitting American president has ever met with the leader of this reclusive regime. The two discussed North Korea's nuclear weapons program in an effort to negotiate a resolution to the ongoing tension between North Korea and the global community. President Trump and Kim Jong-un signed an agreement after this summit, which contained only four vague commitments:

1. Establishing new United States-North Korean relations;
2. Building lasting and stable peace on the Korean Peninsula;
3. Reaffirming the North Korean commitment toward complete denuclearization; and
4. Recovering remains of prisoners of war or those missing in action.

Despite President Trump's insistence that North Korea is no longer a threat to the United States, North Korea continues to pose a tremendous danger to the United States and our Asia-Pacific allies through both its nuclear and conventional arsenals.

Negotiations with North Korea over its nuclear weapons program continued for a time after the June 2018 summit at the working level with US State Department officials, but appear to have yielded no substantive results. Instead of refusing to capitulate to the North's demands and call for working-level negotiations to continue between the United States and North Korea, President Trump will hold another summit with Kim Jong-un in Vietnam on the 27th and 28th of February.⁴ This risks further legitimizing Kim Jong-un and rewarding him for the North's continued aggressive behavior. Instead, the United States should insist on continued follow-on negotiations to the June 2018 summit and work to hammer out the details of an agreement between the United States and North Korea that is smart and tough, and that includes actionable steps the North will commit to for complete, verifiable denuclearization.

A smart and tough deal with North Korea would include four key elements.

1. The elimination of North Korea's inventory of intercontinental ballistic missiles that allow for a nuclear bomb to be launched on parts of the United States.

To deliver a deal that protects America's interests, the Trump Administration must ensure that any agreement addresses North Korea's inventory of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM). North Korea possess an inventory of different types of vehicles that can deliver a nuclear warhead, including short-, medium-, and long-range ballistic missiles. In recent years, it has developed new and longer-range ICBMs that are thought to be able to reach parts of the continental United States. This means North Korea could conceivably hit parts of the country with a nuclear bomb if it is not stopped.⁵ This is a real and serious threat to the United States. North Korea has also been one of the most prolific exporters of its ballistic missile technology for its financial gain, presenting tremendous security concerns about to whom the country has sold—and could sell—this technology.⁶

A smart and tough deal with North Korea would immediately eliminate the country's ICBM capabilities as this presents a direct threat to the United States. While it is a positive step that North Korea has agreed to suspend its ICBM testing to allow for negotiations,⁷ the country has made no commitment yet regarding its ballistic missile program. The United States and its allies, as well as the United Nations, have imposed a series of sanctions on North Korea for both its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. But these sanctions have not put a stop to the country's advancement of these programs, and many issues remain in getting other countries to comply with the sanctions and avoid business with North Korea.⁸ Any deal made by the United States must aim to eliminate the threat of North Korea's ICBMs and address all ranges of its delivery vehicles in order to protect America's allies.

2. Specific, measurable steps to eventually eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons arsenal.

North Korea has a significant stockpile of nuclear material to make a large number of weapons that could cause massive destruction and loss of life to our allies, and conceivably to parts of the United States. Some US intelligence estimates have indicated that North Korea has enough fissile material for up to 60 nuclear warheads, with up to 20 of these warheads possibly already assembled.⁹ Of tremendous concern, a 2017 assessment from the US Defense Intelligence Agency reportedly found that North Korea has the capability to miniaturize a nuclear warhead that can actually fit onto an ICBM.¹⁰ If true, this would be a significant step toward giving the country the capability to hit parts of the continental United States. Since 2006, the country has also conducted a number of nuclear tests, which may be done to test the capabilities of its weapons.¹¹

Any final deal the United States makes with North Korea must focus on laying out specific, measurable steps the country will take to eventually eliminate its arsenal of nuclear warheads, including the massive amount of fissile material it holds to continue to fully assemble new warheads. The ultimate end-goal of any negotiated deal should be the complete, verifiable denuclearization of North Korea.

3. A strong inspection and verification regime to prevent more broken promises.

North Korea has a long history of breaking its promises on nuclear deals. In 1994, North Korea negotiated an Agreed Framework under which the United States agreed to supply North Korea with light water reactors in exchange for freezing its nuclear program.¹² But the deal fell apart in 2002 when the United States alleged North Korea started its program back up again.¹³ In 2003, North Korea pulled out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), which requires non-nuclear weapons states to commit to not developing or acquiring a nuclear weapon. In 2009, Six-Party Talks on North Korea's nuclear program that involved the United States also broke down after North Korea walked away. More recently, in 2012, North Korea promised to stop enriching uranium and halt new tests while allowing international inspectors to enter the country, in exchange for humanitarian aid. But this promising development quickly fell apart when North Korea conducted a long-range missile test.¹⁴

North Korea has now tried to avoid its commitments by playing on differences in definitions with the United States on what denuclearization would mean.¹⁵ North Korea threatened to cancel the summit over US insistence that “unilateral nuclear abandonment” is the starting point for negotiations. Instead, North Korea wants denuclearization to apply to the entire Korean Peninsula, including the removal of US conventional forces, which could mean abandoning our South Korean allies.¹⁶ The summit did not resolve this fundamental tension, which now must be addressed.

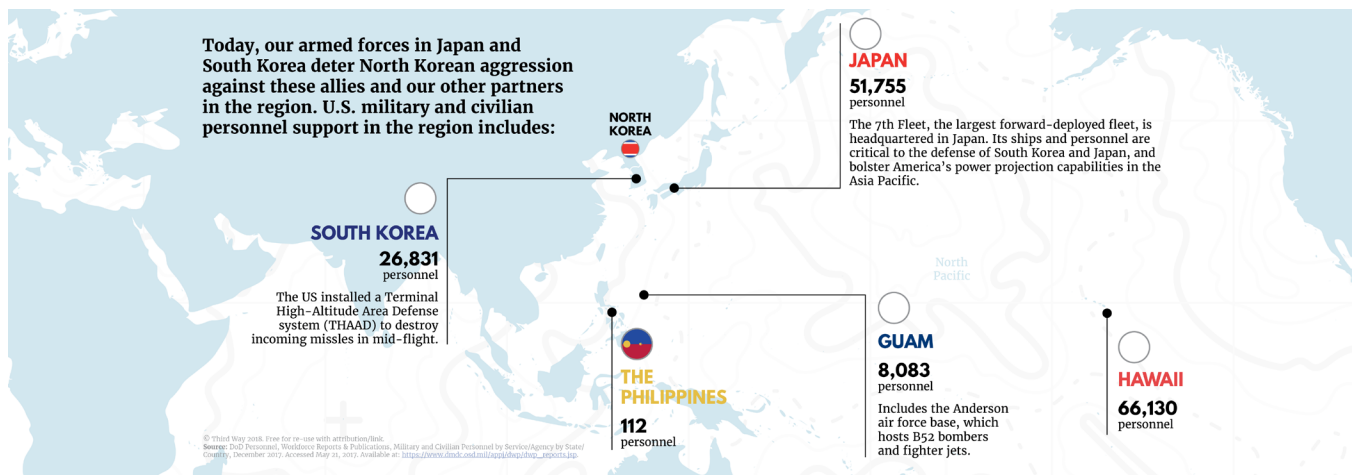
The most effective strategy the United States should pursue to combat this untrustworthiness going forward is *not to trust but verify* compliance with all terms regarding North Korea's nuclear weapons program. This must include an agreement by North Korea to declare the scope of its nuclear program and then establish an extensive architecture to allow international inspectors to verify the scope of the North's program and regularly inspect that the country is upholding its end of any deal. North Korea has a track record of talking, shaking hands with high-level diplomats, and signing agreements—only to break them. President Trump has already approached negotiations with such eagerness that it puts the United States in a weaker negotiating position going forward. The United States should instead move forward with a renewed focus on measurable denuclearization—including a strong and transparent verification and inspection regime—and not be satisfied with symbolic gestures.

4. Coordination with our allies in the region, particularly South Korea and Japan.

The United States has strong partnerships with South Korea and Japan, who are essential negotiating partners. The United States has signed separate treaties with South Korea and Japan that provide for the mutual defense of our nations. Over 28,000 American troops are stationed in South Korea¹⁷ and around 40,000 are in Japan¹⁸—in part to deter against North Korean aggression. These service members would bear the greatest American cost of any conflict with North Korea, which is why any security guarantees in these negotiations must be carefully coordinated with our allies.

In the past, North Korea has demanded that the United States withdraw its forces from the Korean Peninsula in exchange for the North ending its nuclear weapons program. If North

Korea continues this demand and the Trump Administration were to cave, this could further undermine the United States' relationship with its allies while strengthening China's hand in the region. Any negotiations on a change in the US force posture in the region must be coordinated with these allies. President Trump has already acceded to North Korean demands to cancel joint military exercises with South Korea.¹⁹ These joint exercises are essential preparation to ensure American troops, working with South Korean partners, are ready for conflict. Canceling them undermines American military readiness. The United States should not make concessions that weaken our military while the threat from North Korea's nuclear weapons program remains unabated. Any further concessions should be reciprocal as North Korea takes specific steps of their own.



President Trump has weakened our negotiating position in four ways.

The Trump Administration has said it wants to quickly achieve denuclearization in North Korea, believing this can be done in one or a few meetings.²⁰ Already this has proven not to be the case. There have been many agreements with North Korea under previous US administrations that the North has not abided by. To think this will be a quick process is to ignore the history of North Korean nuclear negotiations. Decades of sanctions and isolation of the North Korean regime have only caused the country to advance its nuclear weapons and ballistic programs, not to dismantle them. North Korea will not just hand over its weapons without getting something in return, and there is no history to suggest otherwise. The Trump-Kim June 2018 summit must be viewed as the beginning of a negotiation process—not the end in and of itself. Because the United States could not address all of the key issues for a tough and smart deal, it needs to keep returning to the table until it can.

The Trump Administration will be unable to do this, however, if it continues to:

1. Lower bids even before negotiations start.

The Trump Administration claimed symbolic steps as “victories”²¹ before the Trump-Kim summit was even held and, in doing so, lowered expectations for what the United States would accept as an outcome. The goal for a deal with North Korea is reducing the threat

the country poses to the United States, not simply gaining publicity for the president. It is possible that North Korea's destruction of its nuclear test site may have been only a symbolic gesture or, at worst, a total ruse. Only journalists—not nuclear experts—were on site to verify whether the destruction was done fully and is not reversible.²² The release of three American hostages was seen as an important confidence-building measure leading into negotiations, but these actions also underscore the brutality and capriciousness of the Kim regime. While the United States first insisted on North Korea's complete denuclearization, President Trump later shifted to demanding a series of steps. He then lowered expectations for the summit, claiming it was simply an opportunity to get to know Kim Jong-un. But negotiating against himself is no way to achieve a good outcome for America.

The United States must go into further negotiations with a clear, realistic strategy, viable end-goals, and strong demands for North Korea. The agreement signed by President Trump and Kim Jong-un did not include any agreed-upon definitions or commitments as to how North Korea will denuclearize and what verification for this process would look like. By inflating small concessions as big “victories,” the United States is sending the wrong signal to North Korea that our biggest priority is achieving a deal the Administration can showcase, not a smart and tough one.

2. Let China run the show.

China continues to whisper in North Korea's ear throughout this process. Kim visited China immediately before the summit and shortly thereafter—meeting both times with Chinese President Xi Jinping. The resolution of hostilities with North Korea must not also open the door for China to have more power and impose its will on US allies in the region. China's cooperation and leverage would likely be critical for an effective and sustainable deal with North Korea,²³ but China is playing the long game. China continues to threaten our allies over a number of territorial disputes, and it has a history of malicious behavior toward the United States (e.g., cyberattacks).²⁴ Already, we've seen China partner with Russia to call for an end to the sanctions on North Korea in the United Nations.²⁵ The United States must be careful not to intentionally or inadvertently make China the big winner in negotiations.

3. Sow chaos and confusion before negotiations even begin.

The Administration was unprepared for the June summit, which showed in a lack of consistent strategy and messaging on North Korea. This only served to create chaos and confusion instead of advancing peace. For example, the Administration's mixed-messaging on whether it would be using Libya as a model for negotiations and what that means only served to reinforce North Korea's long-standing fears that the United States is solely interested in removing the country's leadership from power. Libya abandoned its much less advanced nuclear program in 2003; the country's leader Muammar Gaddafi was killed by his own people following a US-led military intervention in 2011. By mentioning Libya and then backtracking, the Administration showed North Korea and the rest of the world that it does not have unified policy goals for North Korea.

Further, President Trump's May 2018 decision to tear up the Iran nuclear deal has also contributed to the chaos and confusion surrounding negotiations with North Korea. This decision demonstrated that the United States might be willing to violate any deal it makes on countries' nuclear weapons programs in the future and go it alone without our allies. The signal this sends to North Korea is unmistakable: what the United States agrees to today

may not, in fact, be what the United States respects tomorrow. President Trump's decision to walk away alone from the Iran deal, particularly when the United States and international inspectors agreed that Iran was not violating the agreement, sends a message to adversaries like North Korea that they cannot take the United States at its word in negotiations.²⁶

4. Alienate America's allies.

South Korea's President Moon Jae-in has been a critical US partner in pushing North Korea to the negotiating table. Unfortunately, in return, when President Trump cancelled the summit with North Korea, he did not notify South Korea ahead of time.²⁷ Further, his cancellation letter focused only on the discussions between the United States and North Korea, minimizing the role of our allies.²⁸





An effective and sustainable deal with North Korea can only be negotiated if our partners in the region are in lock-step with us. Any effective deal going forward will likely have to involve changes to United States and international sanctions on North Korea. For that to work, US partners in imposing these sanctions must agree to do so. Keeping them in the dark on negotiations will only set up a deal for failure.

President Trump gave away more than he gained at the summit.

The deal signed between President Trump and Kim Jong-un may actually end up hurting America's security instead of bolstering it. It made vague promises of "denuclearization" in exchange for security guarantees, but included no specific, measurable steps on either. Kim agreed to inspections of his facilities by neutral independent weapons inspectors—but, thus far, that has not happened.²⁹ The deal failed to even offer an agreed-upon definition of denuclearization, which has been a major sticking point in past agreements. President Trump sacrificed the readiness of American troops in South Korea without achieving any major concessions from North Korea. He has given North Korea legitimacy as a nuclear power on the global stage while giving away key leverage the United States had for negotiations. Moreover, by praising Kim Jong-un profusely, despite his grotesque human rights record, President Trump has made the United States look desperate for a deal while giving credibility to a brutal dictator.

The Administration's strategy toward North Korea has been a failure. North Korea has continued to make developments in its ballistic missile and nuclear weapon program since the summit. In November 2018, reports indicated that North Korea is advancing its ballistic missile program at 16 hidden bases, which boosts their capability of launching nuclear warheads that can reach the United States.³⁰ President Trump has publicly voiced his frustration at the lack of progress on denuclearization and even canceled visits by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo to North Korea.³¹ Instead of using any further summit as leverage to get North Korea back to the negotiating table, President Trump has given into the North's demands and will hold another summit before any further agreements are worked out. A second summit will only serve to lend even more legitimacy and demonstrates the Administration's failed strategy toward North Korea.

While President Trump touts commitments that have already been breached, past presidents were able to obtain specific commitments to halt or roll back particular elements of North Korea’s weapons complex.³²

	Pledge Denuclearization	Nuclear Testing Freeze	Ballistic Missile Testing Freeze	Submit to International Inspections	Suspend Reprocessing & Enrichment	Destroy Nuclear Facilities
 Clinton	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
 Bush	✓			✓		✓
 Obama	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
 Trump	✓					

With what little the June 2018 Trump–Kim summit achieved, the Trump Administration should now focus its efforts on the task at hand: achieving measurable outcomes from the Kim regime that actually eliminate the threat of its nuclear weapons program. Not another flashy summit that will yield little results.

Conclusion

North Korea poses a tremendous threat to the United States and its Asia–Pacific allies. Ultimately, negotiations are the best option to reduce the threat of North Korea and maintain the security of the United States and its regional allies. But a smart and tough deal with North Korea must include strong and transparent inspection and verification mechanisms to ensure that the North is not able to cheat on any deal, be closely coordinated with US regional allies who provide critical deterrence against North Korean aggression, and eliminate the capability of North Korea to hit the United States with a nuclear bomb. In signing the June 12 deal with Kim Jong-un, President Trump gave away more and got less than any other American president—and the commitments he did receive have already been broken. The Trump Administration should focus on getting a smart and tough deal from North Korea, rather than holding frivolous summits that do not achieve concrete solutions. American national security hangs in the balance.

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