

JUNE 22, 2020 | NUMBER 893

Nuclear Anti-Proliferation Policy and the Korea Conundrum

Some Policy Proposals

BY JOHN MUELLER

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States should abandon its bid to separate North Korea from its nuclear weapons and, with South Korea in the lead, push to normalize relations with Pyongyang.

The obsession with nuclear proliferation over the last three-quarters of a century has proved to be unwarranted, and, in a few cases, catastrophic. The few countries that have acquired these weapons have used them to stoke their egos or to deter real or imagined threats. In contrast, alarmed anti-proliferation efforts, as in the U.S. war in Iraq, have proved to be exceedingly costly, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

Meanwhile, Korea may well be at an important historical turning point. There is a reasonable prospect that North Korean leader Kim Jong-un genuinely wants to see his country become developed—he has already instituted some notable, if limited, reforms. In this atmosphere, it seems likely that relations between the North and South can gradually be normalized, which is a development that could become permanent. This does not mean that unification is in the offing, nor that the regime and the privileged elite in the North will cease to

exist or even necessarily be weakened. But the prospect of armed conflict in the area would decrease substantially following normalization. In turn, the plight of the North Korean people—the chief victims of the current stalemate—would markedly improve.

However, the U.S. demand that North Korea relinquish its nuclear weapons stands in the way of this. North Korea considers the weapons to be vital to its fundamental security—especially to deter any U.S. attempt to overthrow its regime by force. Accordingly, abandoning or at least downplaying the nuclear weapons issue is essential to make any progress toward normalization.

The upside to a normalization on the Korean peninsula is enormous, while the downside risk is marginal. If the effort fails—most likely because the North Korean regime, unlike similar ones in China and Vietnam, will prove to be unwilling or incapable of taking the required steps of economic reform—no one will be much worse off than they are now. Accordingly, U.S. policy should focus on the possibilities for normalization by relaxing or removing sanctions, stopping the threats, and letting South Korea take the lead in the process. Any demand that North Korea give up its nuclear weapons can, and should, wait.

“There is a reasonable prospect of forging a permanent normalization of relations on the Korean peninsula—if the United States drops, or at least downplays, its demand that North Korea denuclearize.”

INTRODUCTION

For three-quarters of a century now, just about everyone, including foreign policy professionals from both major political parties, has taken it as an article of faith that the proliferation of nuclear weapons is an overwhelming danger and that all possible measures, including war, must be taken to keep that from happening. In the past few decades, the focus has been on the latest entry in the nuclear-weapons club: North Korea. A series of presidents, beginning with Bill Clinton, have declared that Pyongyang must not be allowed to possess nuclear weapons, and current U.S. policy aims for the “verified denuclearization of North Korea,” as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo explained to reporters in late April 2020.¹

In the first section of this paper, I critique the widely held proposition that, given the unique danger that nuclear weapons pose, all means should be employed to reduce the number of nuclear-weapons states. In fact, this proposition is faulty. Moreover, while nuclear weapons have killed no one since 1945, efforts to keep nuclear weapons from proliferating have led to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

In the second section, I argue that today’s obsession about nuclear proliferation stands in the way of a development on the Korean peninsula that could be extremely important. Because North Korean leader Kim Jong-un seems to be genuine about wanting to see his country become developed, there is a reasonable prospect of forging a permanent normalization of relations on the peninsula—if the United States drops, or at least downplays, its demand that North Korea denuclearize. This would reduce the prospect of armed conflict there while also reducing the perpetual suffering of the North Korean people.

The upside to a normalization on the Korean peninsula is enormous. And there is not much of a downside: if the effort fails, no one will be much worse off than they are now. Accordingly, U.S. policy should involve downplaying the nuclear issue, actively exploring the possibilities for normalization, relaxing or

removing the sanctions, stopping the threats, and letting South Korea take the lead in the normalization process.

NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION

Like the notion accepted in the 1950s that World War III was pretty much inevitable, the notion that nuclear weapons proliferation is a major problem has been substantially overwrought.² At the same time, the costly impact of aggressive policies to combat proliferation has often been overlooked or ignored.

The Benign Consequences of Proliferation

When China began building a nuclear capacity, President John F. Kennedy seriously considered bombing Chinese nuclear facilities. He was heard to declare that “A Chinese nuclear test is likely to be historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s,” and his director of the Central Intelligence Agency soberly prophesied that, with that event, nuclear war would become almost inevitable.³

Declamations like Kennedy’s continue to this day.⁴ Elected officials and foreign policy experts have repeatedly warned that if Iran or North Korea were to get a nuclear weapon, there would be a proliferation cascade, resulting in an increased risk of nuclear war or, in the words of Mohamed ElBaradei, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, “the beginning of the end of our civilization.”⁵ North Korea has now had the weapons for well over a decade, but there is little sign of the warned-about cascade: thus far, no country in the region has altered its commitment to remain a nuclear-weapons-free state.

Despite decades of such fears, the consequences of the nuclear-weapons proliferation that has taken place have been substantially benign. As it turned out, the United States did not attack or otherwise punish China for developing nuclear weapons, and a nuclear-armed China did not become more aggressive: in fact, the existence of its

arsenal has proved to be of little historical consequence. In retrospect, “historically the most significant and worst event of the 1960s” stemmed not from China’s nuclear weapons, but from Kennedy’s tragically misguided decision to begin sending American troops in substantial numbers to Vietnam—largely to confront the Chinese threat that he believed lurked there.⁶

In general, regimes that have acquired the weapons have used them to stoke their egos or to deter real or imagined threats. They have quietly kept the weapons in storage (or even denied their existence) and haven’t even found much benefit in rattling them from time to time.

Ego-stoking was on full display in France when it exploded its first nuclear bomb in 1960. President Charles de Gaulle was jubilant: “Hoorah for France!” he proclaimed, “since this morning she is stronger and prouder.”⁷

There are conceivable situations under which nuclear weapons could serve a deterrent function: perhaps if Iran had possessed them in 1980 or Kuwait had possessed them in 1990, Iraq would not have invaded those countries. However, under the conditions in which we have actually lived, it is questionable whether nuclear weapons have ever been deterrents.⁸ In particular, it is far from clear that nuclear weapons are what kept the Cold War from becoming a hot war. Indeed, the Soviet Union seems never to have seriously considered any sort of direct military aggression against the United States or Europe. As the respected scholar Robert Jervis notes, “the Soviet archives have yet to reveal any serious plans for unprovoked aggression against Western Europe, not to mention a first strike against the United States.” And, after researching those archives, historian Vojtech Mastny concludes that “all Warsaw Pact scenarios presumed a war started by NATO” and the “strategy of nuclear deterrence [was] irrelevant to deterring a major war that the enemy did not wish to launch in the first place.” As Andrian Danilevich, a top Soviet war

planner, put it in a 1992 interview, “We never had a single thought of a first strike against the U.S. The doctrine was always very clear: we will always respond, but never initiate.”⁹ It could be argued, of course, that this perspective stemmed from American nuclear deterrence policy. However, those who would so contend need to demonstrate that the Soviets had any desire to risk provoking anything like the catastrophe they had just endured in World War II, in which an estimated 26 million Soviet citizens died. Moreover, they were under the spell of a theory that said they would inevitably come to rule the world merely by inspiring, encouraging, and aiding like-minded revolutionaries abroad.

Some have suggested that nuclear proliferation has had little consequence because the only countries to possess nuclear weapons have had rational leaders, and that circumstances would be far different when dictators get the bomb.¹⁰ But nuclear weapons have proliferated to large, important countries run by unchallenged monsters who, at the time they acquired the bombs, were certifiably deranged. For example, Joseph Stalin had been plotting to transform nature by planting lots of trees and was given to wandering around the Kremlin mumbling that he could no longer trust anyone, not even himself. And Mao Zedong had launched an addled campaign to remake his society that instead created a famine that killed tens of millions of people.¹¹ Yet neither country used its nuclear weapons for anything other than to seek prestige and to deter real or imagined threats, and China has so far built far fewer of the weapons than it could afford to.

Moreover, nuclear proliferation has proceeded at a remarkably slow pace and the nuclear club has remained a small one, confounding the somber prophecies of generations of alarmists: even the supposedly *optimistic* forecasts about nuclear dispersion have proved to be too pessimistic.¹² It was in 1960, for example, that presidential candidate John F. Kennedy insisted there might be 10, 15, or even 20 countries with a nuclear capacity

“It is questionable whether nuclear weapons have ever been deterrents.”

“Efforts to keep certain states from obtaining nuclear weapons have caused far more deaths than have been inflicted by nuclear weapons in all of history.”

by 1964.¹³ However, although dozens of technologically capable countries have considered obtaining nuclear arsenals, very few have done so. A key reason for this is that the possession of such expensive armaments generally conveys little advantage to the possessor. They are difficult to obtain and of dubious military utility. The effort of becoming a nuclear-weapon state requires a spectacular investment of time, money, and scientific talent, and it has been particularly difficult for administratively dysfunctional countries.¹⁴ And an enthusiastic effort to enter the nuclear-weapons club may well rile neighbors.¹⁵

Nor have the weapons proved to be crucial even as status symbols. Pakistan and Russia probably garner more attention than they would if they did not have nuclear weapons. But how much more status would Japan have if it possessed nuclear weapons? Would anybody pay more attention to Britain or France if their arsenals held 5,000 nuclear weapons, or would anybody pay less attention to those countries if they had none? Did China need nuclear weapons to impress the world with its economic growth? Or with its Olympics?

Proliferation alarmists may occasionally grant that countries principally obtain a nuclear arsenal to counter real or perceived threats, but argue that the newly nuclear country will then use its nuclear weapons to dominate its area. That was the language President George W. Bush used in building the case for war with Iraq, while Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) contended that a nuclear-armed Saddam Hussein “would hold his neighbors and us hostage.” Later, Bush maintained that a nuclear Iran would become “the predominant state in the Middle East,” lording it over its neighbors.¹⁶

Exactly how that domination is to be carried out is never made clear. One scenario might involve an atomic country rattling the occasional rocket, after which other countries in the area, suitably intimidated, would bow to its demands. However, Saddam presided over a deeply resentful population and an unreliable army—fearing overthrow, he was wary about issuing his army bullets and

would not allow it to come within 30 miles of Baghdad with heavy equipment.¹⁷ It is far from clear what he could have done with a tiny number of bombs against his neighbors and their massively armed well-wishers. He was fully containable and deterrable.¹⁸ Most likely, any threatened states would make common cause with each other and with other concerned countries against the threatening neighbor—rather in the way they coalesced into an alliance of convenience to oppose Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990.¹⁹ Indeed, an extensive study of the historical record by scholars Todd Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann concludes that nuclear coercion doesn’t work primarily because “threats to launch nuclear attacks for offensive purposes fundamentally lack credibility.”²⁰

The Destructive Consequences of Anti-Proliferation Policy

Although the consequences of nuclear proliferation have proved to be substantially benign, the same cannot be said for those policies aimed at halting nuclear proliferation. Indeed, efforts to keep certain states from obtaining nuclear weapons have caused far more deaths than have been inflicted by nuclear weapons (or even all weapons of mass destruction) in all of history.²¹

There is bipartisan support for active counterproliferation policies, up to and including preventive war. In the presidential campaign of 2008, candidate Barack Obama repeatedly announced that he would “do everything in [his] power to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon—everything.”²² And his opponent, John McCain, insisted that Iran must be kept from obtaining a nuclear weapon at all costs.²³ Neither bothered to tally what “everything” might entail or what the costs might be.

The war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq has shown what the consequences of such thinking can be. It was sold as a militarized anti-proliferation effort required to keep the regime from developing nuclear (and similarly threatening) weapons. An additional

concern in the post-9/11 era was that he might give some of these weapons to eager and congenial terrorists.²⁴ Thus, Bush pointedly and prominently warned that the United States “will not permit the world’s most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world’s most destructive weapons,” noting that “we don’t want the smoking gun to be a mushroom cloud.”²⁵ Karl Rove, one of Bush’s top political advisers, acknowledged in 2008 that, absent the belief that Iraq possessed, or would come to possess, nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction, “I suspect that the administration’s course of action would have been to work to find more creative ways to constrain him like in the 90s.”²⁶ Although Democrats have derided the war as unnecessary, most came to that conclusion only after the United States was unable to find either nuclear weapons or a nuclear weapons program in Iraq.²⁷ Even knowing about the resulting bloodshed in Iraq, many continue to argue that their support of the war would have been justified if the intelligence about Iraq’s programs had been accurate. Conservative estimates of the number of deaths resulting from the anti-proliferation war against Iraq run well over two hundred thousand—more than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.²⁸

Moreover, the devastation wrought on Iraq in the service of limiting nuclear proliferation did not begin with the war in 2003. For the previous 13 years, under both Democratic and Republican administrations, that country had suffered under economic sanctions that were designed to force Saddam Hussein from office (and, effectively, from life, since he had no viable sanctuary elsewhere) and to keep the country from developing weapons, particularly nuclear ones.²⁹

There is nothing wrong with making nuclear nonproliferation a high priority—indeed, it would do a favor to dissuaded countries by saving them a lot of money and pointless effort. But avoiding policies that can lead to the deaths of tens or hundreds of thousands of people should surely be a higher priority. Nuclear proliferation, while not particularly

desirable, is unlikely to prove to be a major danger, and government officials and national security professionals should reconsider anti-proliferation policies, which can do more harm than the potential (and often imaginary) problems they seek to address.

THE CASE OF NORTH KOREA

Since World War II, then, none of the handful of countries with nuclear weapons have used them for anything other than to gain prestige and/or to deter real or imagined threats. North Korea seems likely to do the same. History strongly suggests that the alarm its nuclear program has inspired is not justified.

North Korea’s Nuclear Program

The regime in North Korea is perhaps the most pathetic, insecure, and contemptible in the world, excelling mostly at maintaining itself in power. And it knows that launching a nuclear bomb—or even a conventional one, for that matter—against a country armed with thousands of nuclear weapons could result in its annihilation. Unsurprisingly, Pyongyang insists that its nuclear program is entirely for defensive purposes. Moreover, if its goal were to commit self-destructive mayhem by launching an international war, it has long possessed the capacity to do so. With the artillery that it has amassed, it could pulverize much of South Korea, including the capital city, Seoul.³⁰

The regime brandishes its nuclear weapons program to stoke North Koreans’ sense of national pride, of course.³¹ And the threat it needs to deter has not been difficult to identify. Since the 1950s, the United States has persistently and unambiguously wanted to take out the regime, and has, at times, actively schemed to do so. For example, in the 1990s, the Clinton administration, alarmed by concerns about a North Korean nuclear weapon, moved to impose deep economic sanctions to make the isolated country even poorer than it already was (insofar as that was possible).³² In the next few years, when floods and bad

“North Korea knows that launching a nuclear bomb against a country armed with thousands of nuclear weapons could result in its annihilation.”

“In 2018, Kim Jong-un declared that North Korea would now focus on economic development because the goal of becoming a nuclear power had been achieved.”

weather exacerbated the economic disaster that had been inflicted upon the country by its rulers, U.S. officials denied the existence of a famine in which more than a million people perished. They did so, in part, to use food aid to wring diplomatic concessions from North Korea on the nuclear issue.³³

Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, President George W. Bush announced that America’s “responsibility to history” was now to “rid the world of evil.”³⁴ A few months later, he specified that a special “axis of evil” existed, and that it lurked in this order: North Korea, Iran, and Iraq.³⁵ As Bush geared up to attack number three in early 2003, North Korea announced that it would be withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. It conducted its first nuclear test in 2006, and has subsequently developed nuclear weapons and a capacity to deliver them—perhaps even on the United States.

Kim Jong-un and the Present Situation

Until recently, North Korea’s official policy was focused on *Juche*, or self-reliance—particularly a self-reliant economy.³⁶ However, in 2013, Kim Jong-un announced a two-track policy, *byungjin noseon* (“parallel lines”), stressing two important themes: becoming a nuclear power and furthering economic development.³⁷ The policy sought to guarantee North Korea’s security with a nuclear-weapons and missile program designed particularly to deter the distant but threatening United States.³⁸ And the policy sought to generate economic development, perhaps with the experience of China, Vietnam, or even Singapore in mind—countries where economic development has occurred without toppling the regime. Cato Senior Fellow Doug Bandow compares this policy to that of the two previous leaders in Pyongyang and notes that Kim Jong-un’s “emphasis on economic growth distinguishes him from his father and grandfather, who appeared to fear the destabilizing impact of almost any change.”³⁹

The younger Kim seems increasingly comfortable with progress on the first goal—even at times declaring it to have been “perfected.”⁴⁰ Indeed, in 2018, he declared that North Korea would now focus on economic development because the goal of becoming a nuclear power had been achieved.⁴¹

There has been some progress on the economic development goal—mostly in the growing presence of private markets that at one time would have been closed down by the regime.⁴² For the most part, as researchers Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland point out, progress has been de facto rather than de jure, but it is nonetheless real.⁴³ Analyst Chung Min Lee believes Kim “genuinely wants to transform North Korea into an economic powerhouse,” and he points out that Kim has let farmers keep more of their harvests; permitted factories to have more leeway to make their own decisions on quality control, prices, and wages; and allowed small enterprises to conduct a greater number of direct business-to-business interactions.⁴⁴ And Lee notes that Kim repeatedly talks about producing quality consumer goods and about following “worldwide trends.”⁴⁵

Although Kim appears serious about economic development, there could be setbacks, whether caused by his capricious ruling methods, opposition within the party, or fears of setting in motion developments that might threaten the existing regime. Lee stresses that “structural reforms are extremely risky” because of the potential of opening a floodgate that can’t be controlled.⁴⁶ And there might also be a danger, as Haggard and Noland suggest, that “a truly reformed North Korea would be pulled into South Korea’s orbit,” an outcome that the North might “regard as unacceptable.”⁴⁷ However, the direction so far is distinctly positive, and judicious efforts to nudge the progress along, particularly by South Korea, could create a more relaxed atmosphere and eventually lead to a highly desirable normalization of relations on the peninsula. It seems entirely possible that Korea is at one of the most important turning points in its history.

This does not mean that unification is in the offing. The economic and cultural divergence of the two Koreas over the last seven decades has been extensive, and the notion that they could or should be unified any time soon is at best romantic and at worst dangerous. The unification of the two Germanys was a remarkably difficult and costly process even though those two countries were far less different from each other than the two Koreas have grown to be. A better model might be found in the peaceful and mutually advantageous coexistence of Germany and Austria—two separate countries that share a common language, history, and cultural heritage. It is very sensible for South Korea to expand economic and social contacts with North Korea, and to seek family reunifications. But a conscious drive for unification in the near future would be unwise for the South and threatening to the North.

Nor does normalization of relations mean that the essential nature of the regime in the North will change and that human rights there will be honored. Whatever its defects, the North Korean leadership does seem to know how to stay in control. As noted earlier, efforts by the United States in the 1990s to exacerbate economic suffering in hopes of toppling the regime proved to be severely—and tragically—misguided. Some force may yet topple the regime, but efforts from the outside to hasten this development are likely to be futile and potentially counterproductive. There is no way to aid the people of the North without also aiding their leaders, and outsiders should be prepared to grasp this unfortunate reality. Indeed, note Haggard and Noland, efforts at engagement are likely to work best when they “directly pay off the leadership and its core supporters.”⁴⁸

But economic development is likely to improve the condition of the North Korean people—the chief victims of the current situation—as it has in Vietnam and China. Since the end of the Cold War, famines and food shortages have led to stunted growth and potentially to brain damage in the people affected, and they continue to do so.⁴⁹

POLICY SUGGESTIONS

Decades of experience with the proliferation of nuclear weapons suggest that it doesn’t make much difference whether North Korea has them or not. Moreover, it seems that the time may well be ripe for very substantial progress toward normalization on the Korean peninsula—a development that could become permanent. These two propositions lead to a set of policy suggestions.

Downplay the Nuclear Issue while Actively Exploring the Possibilities for Normalization

For progress to take place on normalization, it is vital that the nuclear weapons issue be detached from the process. According to Lee Jong-kook, South Korea’s consul general in Chicago, “Substantial progress depends on the success of the denuclearization negotiations.”⁵⁰ To the degree this is true, it presents a conundrum: progress on normalization will be slow or nonexistent because North Korea thinks it needs the weapons for security. As Bandow stresses, “there is a great reluctance to admit the obvious, that North Korea is already a nuclear state and is highly unlikely to surrender what the regime sees as the ultimate tool to guarantee its survival.”⁵¹ Moreover, as Bandow also points out, North Korea’s wariness about negotiating away its nuclear capacity can only have been enhanced by the experience of Libya’s dictator, Muammar el-Qaddafi, who cut a deal with the Americans in 2003. When Qaddafi was confronted with an insurrection in 2011, the Obama administration militarily intervened, speeding his downfall and brutal execution.⁵² Citing that episode, political scientist James Fearon points out that there is an enormous credibility problem. “No U.S. administration,” he notes, “can commit itself not to act to help replace Kim’s government if it were to face major domestic instability.”⁵³

Perhaps the nuclear issue could be revived in the long run. But this would be productive only if the North feels secure, and a general normalization of relations on the peninsula seems clearly to be prerequisite.⁵⁴

“The time may well be ripe for very substantial progress toward normalization on the Korean peninsula.”

“The sanctions seem to be having little or no effect except to make the North Korean people even more miserable.”

Relax or Remove the Sanctions

The sanctions on North Korea are designed in considerable part to force the regime to cut back, or even cut off, its nuclear program. Last year, Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute noted that “a drought and crop shortfalls were exposing as many as 10 million North Koreans, about 40 percent of the country’s population, to ‘severe food shortages,’” and he anticipated that “As sanctions cut off the oxygen in the tent, these trends can be expected to worsen.” He predicted that “when the North Korean government starts running out of currency reserves and strategic stockpiles of food and energy, the crisis will no longer be possible to conceal.” Eberstadt provocatively called this “the sanctions noose.”⁵⁵

Given the current state of tensions and distrust, however, the removal of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal is a nonstarter for the North under just about any condition, and the sanctions seem to be having little or no effect except to make the North Korean people even more miserable.⁵⁶ Whatever happens, the regime is likely to remain in control while passing on negative consequences to its people. In addition, the sanctions include a set of secondary sanctions on other countries, and these hamper South Korean efforts to reach out to the North at this crucial time. The sanctions, then, are doubly foolish.⁵⁷

Stop Threatening to Overthrow the Regime

Pyongyang and Washington have at various times issued a series of escalating threats. However, these exercises in name-calling and mindless bloviating have declined in the last few years. That is a desirable development and should be continued.

One way to reduce the likelihood that some countries will go nuclear is a simple one: stop threatening them. It seems clear that China’s acquisition of the weapons, like that of North Korea’s, was impelled primarily by incessant threats from the United States. In an extensive analysis of the evidence, scholars John Wilson Lewis and Xue Litai conclude

that, faced with “increased American threats to use nuclear weapons against them,” in 1955 the Chinese “resolved to acquire nuclear weapons of their own.” McGeorge Bundy reached a similar conclusion, observing pointedly that “the weapon was first sought when Mao felt bullied by Washington.”⁵⁸

Let South Korea Take the Lead

For decades the United States has been utterly obsessed by the North Korean nuclear arsenal and has embraced extreme, even hysterical, worst-case-scenario fantasies about what the North Koreans might do with such weapons. In the process, America has adopted a hostile and threatening posture that only increases North Korea’s desire to have nuclear weapons and the systems to deliver them. And that hostility fuels North Korea’s nuclear development in another, rather perverse, way: it seems that the only way that country can garner international attention is when it advances its nuclear program.

Some Americans have even declared that a war on the Korean peninsula—which, of course, would mostly kill Koreans—would be preferable to letting the North pursue a nuclear weapons program. As Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) put it in 2017, “If there’s going to be a war to stop [Kim Jong-un], it will be over there. If thousands die, they’re going to die over there. They’re not going to die here.” And, he added, President Trump “told me that to my face.”⁵⁹

It may well be time for South Korea to take charge of its own destiny. North Korea is a friendless, pathetic, insecure, fuel-short country, and its government is in no position to launch a sustained military adventure. Its 1950 invasion of South Korea could not have happened without support from Communist China and the Soviet Union, and that sort of outside support will not be forthcoming in the future—quite the contrary. Moreover, even with support, North Korea’s 1950 invasion failed in a few months and it had to be rescued by China. And, even if North Korea were to attack, the world community—including the United States—is likely to rally behind South

Korea even as they did for alliance-free Kuwait when Iraq attacked it in 1990.⁶⁰ Thus, it is not clear that South Korea needs American forces for deterrence because the North Koreans are unlikely to attack. South Korea's formal alliance with America seems scarcely necessary.⁶¹

It would be sensible for South Korea to take the lead in the normalization process, and it seems eager to do so. And in the wake of its remarkably successful handling of the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, the administration of President Moon Jae-in seems well-positioned politically to take on the task. Should the Korean problem become less of a military one, South Korea might consider reducing its expensive military forces and holding fewer military exercises, which is something that would help to reduce tensions with the North. Obviously, there would be something of a risk to this, but, given North Korea's feeble friendliness, it is not likely to be a great one.

CONCLUSION

Historically, South Korea has been relatively poor. In the 20th century it experienced Japanese occupation, the destruction and turmoil of World War II, the Korean War, and the misguided policies and corruption of some of its early leaders after 1945. The progress it has made in the last few decades approaches the miraculous. And it is its economic development (including the way it survived and productively learned from the 1997 economic crisis) and its democratic stability, not its

military capacity, that causes people and nations around the world to pay attention to it. Today, international status flows primarily from economic progress, maintaining a stable and productive society, and, for many countries, putting on a good Olympics or sending a rocket to, or toward, the moon.⁶²

It is apparent that history is on the side of democratic, capitalistic South Korea, while North Korea is a bizarre relic of a bygone era. Korea has a very long history, and its sheer duration suggests that there is no need to take risks to speed up historical processes, especially when those processes are almost inevitably going to work to South Korea's long-term benefit. What is most required is not persistent alarm, but hard work at negotiating and judicious, watchful patience.

It seems reasonable to suggest, even taking the difficulties into account, that a permanent normalization would eventually result. The upside to a normalization on the Korean peninsula is enormous. And there is not much of a downside: should the effort fail—most likely because the North Korean regime, unlike similar ones in China and Vietnam, will prove to be unwilling or incapable of taking the required steps of economic reform—no one will be much worse off than they are now. Accordingly, U.S. policy should focus on the possibilities for normalization by relaxing or removing sanctions, stopping the threats, and letting South Korea take the lead in the normalization process. Any demand that North Korea give up its nuclear weapons can, and should, wait.

“It would be sensible for South Korea to take the lead in the normalization process, and the administration of President Moon Jae-in seems well-positioned politically to take on the task.”

NOTES

1. “Pompeo Says ‘Still Hopeful’ for a North Korea Deal,” AFP, April 29, 2020. For a timeline of events pertaining to U.S. policy toward North Korea, see “Chronology of U.S.–North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy,” Arms Control Association.
2. Historian John Lewis Gaddis notes that, in 1950, no one among foreign policy decisionmakers believed there would be no world war in the next half century or that the United States and the USSR, “soon to have tens of thousands of thermonuclear weapons pointed at one another, would agree tacitly never to use any of them.” John Lewis Gaddis, *George F. Kennan: An American Life* (New York: Penguin, 2011), p. 403. On this rather remarkable, and erroneous, unanimity, see John Mueller, “History and Nuclear Rationality,” *National Interest*, November 19, 2012.
3. On “worst event,” see William Burr and Jeffrey T. Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64,” *International Security* 25, no. 3 (Winter 2000/2001): 61. On “almost inevitable,” see Francis J. Gavin, “Blasts from the Past: Proliferation Lessons from the 1960s,” *International Security* 29, no. 3 (Winter 2004/2005): 104. See also John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 95–97.
4. For a litany, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, pp. 89–95.
5. The statement from 2006 is quoted in Etel Solingen, *Nuclear Logics: Contrasting Paths in East Asia and the Middle East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 7.
6. For the importance of fear of an expansive China on U.S. decisionmaking over Vietnam, see John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), pp. 168–73, 177–81.
7. “The Thoughts of Charles De Gaulle,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 12, 1968, p. 103.
8. For the argument that “there are some indications that Indian officials . . . worried about nuclear escalation” and that this “probably played a role” in deterring India from attacking further in a border crisis in 2001–2002, see Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 161, 256. It is also sometimes argued that Pakistan’s nuclear arsenal helped deter India from a direct military response to the Pakistan-based terror attack on the Indian city of Mumbai in 2008.
9. Robert Jervis, “Was the Cold War a Security Dilemma?” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 59; and Vojtech Mastny, “Introduction,” in Vojtech Mastny, Sven G. Holtmark, and Andreas Wenger, eds., *War Plans and Alliances in the Cold War: Threat Perceptions in the East and West* (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 3, 27. Andrian Danilevich is quoted in Nicholas Thompson, *The Hawk and the Dove: Paul Nitze, George Kennan, and the History of the Cold War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2009), p. 262. See also Stephen E. Ambrose, “Secrets of the Cold War,” *New York Times*, December 27, 1990; Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Last Testament*, ed. Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974), p. 533; and William Burr and Svetlana Savranskaya, eds., “Previously Classified Interviews with Former Soviet Officials Reveal U.S. Strategic Intelligence Failure Over Decades: 1995 Contractor Study Finds that U.S. Analysts Exaggerated Soviet Aggressiveness and Understated Moscow’s Fears of a U.S. First Strike,” Nuclear Vault, National Security Archive, George Washington University, September 11, 2009. For an extended discussion, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, chap. 3.
10. Scott D. Sagan, “Armed and Dangerous: When Dictators Get the Bomb,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 6 (November/December 2018): 35–43.
11. Stalin: Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday*, p. 123; Mao: Frank Dikötter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (New York: Walker, 2010). For a similar observation, see Doug Bandow, “Avoiding a Korean Calamity: Why Resolving the Dispute with Pyongyang Requires Keeping the Peace,” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 840, April 16, 2018, pp. 6, 14.
12. Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, and Foreign Policy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 5. See also Moeed Yusuf, *Predicting Proliferation: The History of the Future of Nuclear Weapons* (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2009), pp. 4, 60–61.
13. Sidney Kraus, ed., *The Great Debates: Kennedy vs. Nixon, 1960* (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana Press, 1962), p. 394.
14. Jacques E. C. Hymans, *Achieving Nuclear Ambitions: Scientists, Politicians, and Proliferation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

15. For an extended discussion, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, chaps. 7, 8. For the argument that the slowness of proliferation has not been due either to the efforts of the United States or the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, see pp. 118–27.
16. Bush insisted that a nuclear Iraq “would be in a position to dominate the Middle East.” White House, “President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat,” Cincinnati, Ohio, October 7, 2002, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB80/new/doc%2012/President%20Bush%20Outlines%20Iraqi%20Threat.htm>; David Welna, “McCain and Bush: Common Ground on War, Torture,” NPR, June 16, 2008. Later Bush: Peter Brookes, “Iran Emboldened: Tehran Seeks to Dominate Middle East Politics,” *Armed Forces Journal*, April 2, 2007. See also Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Threatening Storm: The Case for Invading Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2003), p. 418.
17. Bullets: James Fallows, “Why Iraq Has No Army,” *The Atlantic*, December 2005, p. 72. Equipment: Maggie O’Kane, “Saddam Wields Terror—and Feigns Respect,” *The Guardian*, November 24, 1998.
18. See John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “Iraq: An Unnecessary War,” *Foreign Policy* 82, no. 1 (January/February 2003): 50–59; John Mueller, “Should We Invade Iraq?,” *Reason*, January 2003.
19. See also Stephen M. Walt, “Containing Rogues and Renegades: Coalition Strategies and Counterproliferation,” in Victor A. Utgoff, ed., *The Coming Crisis: Nuclear Proliferation, U.S. Interests, and World Order* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 191–226.
20. Sechser and Fuhrmann, *Nuclear Weapons and Coercive Diplomacy*, p. 236.
21. On the expansion of the category of weapons of mass destruction, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, pp. 11–13, 242n25; and John Mueller and Karl Mueller, “The Rockets’ Red Glare: Just What Are ‘Weapons of Mass Destruction,’ Anyway?,” *Foreign Policy*, July 7, 2009.
22. Barack Obama, “Remarks at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s Annual Policy Conference,” Washington, DC, June 4, 2008.
23. Tim Reid and Tom Baldwin, “Nuclear Iran Must Be Stopped at All Costs, Says McCain,” *The Times* (London), January 26, 2006.
24. John Mueller, *War and Ideas: Selected Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 151–52.
25. Will not permit: George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address,” January 29, 2002. Mushroom cloud: “Bush: Don’t Wait for Mushroom Cloud,” CNN, October 7, 2002.
26. Sam Stein, “Rove: We Wouldn’t Have Invaded Iraq If We Knew the Truth about WMDs,” *Huffington Post*, December 2, 2008.
27. Jacob Weisberg, “How Did I Get Iraq Wrong?,” *Slate*, March 21, 2008; and Hillary Rodman Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), pp. 136–37.
28. Philip Bump, “15 Years after the Iraq War Began, the Death Count Is Still Murky,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2018.
29. See Richard Hanania, “Ineffective, Immoral, Politically Convenient: America’s Overreliance on Economic Sanctions and What to Do about It,” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 884, February 18, 2020, p. 6.
30. Bandow, “Avoiding a Korean Calamity,” pp. 4, 9; and Mark Bowden, “How to Deal with North Korea,” *The Atlantic*, July/August 2017.
31. See, for example, Jean H. Lee, “Nuclear Weapons and Their Pride of Place in North Korea,” Wilson Center (blog post), August 6, 2019.
32. Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), pp. 308, 316. On the alarm, see James Fallows, “The Panic Gap: Reactions to North Korea’s Bomb,” *National Interest* 38 (Winter 1994/1995): 40–45.
33. Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, pp. 318, 399; Andrew S. Natsios, *The Great North Korean Famine* (Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2001), pp. 147–48, 215; and Bandow, “Avoiding a Korean Calamity,” p. 7. For an overview with additional sources, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, pp. 135–37.
34. George W. Bush, “Remarks by the President,” Washington National Cathedral, Washington, DC, September 14, 2001.
35. George W. Bush, “State of the Union Address,” January 29, 2002.
36. Chung Min Lee, *The Hermit King: The Dangerous Game of Kim*

Jong Un (New York: All Points Books, 2019), p. 64.

37. Lee, *The Hermit King*, p. 69.

38. This would require that its missiles complete the trip and that their warheads detonate, neither of which is likely given the country's technological prowess: 88 percent of the missile flight tests have failed (5 to 10 percent is normal). Bowden, "How to Deal with North Korea."

39. Doug Bandow, "How Kim Jong-Un Dominates North Korea," *National Interest*, April 7, 2020.

40. Sagan, "Armed and Dangerous," p. 36.

41. Lee, *The Hermit King*, p. 64.

42. Victor Cha and Lisa Collins, "The Markets: Private Economy and Capitalism in North Korea?," Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 26, 2018.

43. Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Hard Target: Sanctions, Inducements, and the Case of North Korea* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017), pp. 227, 234–39. See also Justin V. Hastings, *A Most Enterprising Country: North Korea in the Global Economy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), pp. 178–83.

44. Lee, *The Hermit King*, p. 64.

45. Lee, *The Hermit King*, pp. 77, 80.

46. Lee, *The Hermit King*, pp. 83–84.

47. Haggard and Noland, *Hard Target*, p. 237.

48. Haggard and Noland, *Hard Target*, p. 7.

49. Richard Knight, "Are North Koreans Really Three Inches Shorter than South Koreans?," *BBC News Magazine*, April 23, 2012; and Arijeta Lajka, "North Korean Food Shortages Leave Generations Stunted," CBS News, November 19, 2018.

50. Lee Jong-kook, talk at Ohio State University, March 21, 2019.

51. Doug Bandow, "How Donald Trump Can Jumpstart Diplomacy with North Korea," *National Interest*, February 18, 2020.

52. Bandow, "How Kim Jong-Un Dominates North Korea." See

also Bandow, "Avoiding a Korean Calamity," pp. 2, 4; and Paul R. Pillar, "The Terrorist Consequences of the Libyan Intervention," *National Interest*, March 23, 2011.

53. James D. Fearon, "The Big Problem with the North Koreans Isn't That We Can't Trust Them. It's That They Can't Trust Us," Monkey Cage (blog), *Washington Post*, August 16, 2017.

54. It does not seem to be wise, useful, or necessary for South Korea to develop nuclear weapons. With war on the Korean peninsula a low probability, a South Korean nuclear weapons program would only excite desperation in the North (and hysteria in the United States) and could push things dramatically in the wrong direction.

55. Nicholas Eberstadt, "Kim Jong-un's Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Year," *New York Times*, August 15, 2019.

56. See also Bandow, "Avoiding a Korean Calamity," p. 3; and Hastings, *A Most Enterprising Country*, p. 178.

57. For an agile discussion of the sanctions issue more broadly, see Hanania, "Ineffective, Immoral, Politically Convenient."

58. John Wilson Lewis and Litai Xue, *China Builds the Bomb* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), p. 34; and McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices about the Bomb in the First Fifty Years* (New York: Random House, 1988), p. 531. See also David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb: The Soviet Union and Atomic Energy, 1939–1956* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 355; and Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, p. 144.

59. Uri Friedman, "Lindsey Graham Reveals the Dark Calculus of Striking North Korea," *The Atlantic*, August 1, 2017. In 2003, the prominent neoconservative and Defense Department adviser Richard Perle stressed that "the interests of the South Koreans are not at all identical to ours." They "have an interest in doing everything possible to avoid military conflict," but in contrast, the American president has "first and foremost, a commitment to the security of the United States." Richard Perle, interview by *Frontline*, PBS, March 27, 2003. In 2004, Graham Allison, after estimating—conservatively, he says—that North Korea would have the capacity to produce 50 to 70 nuclear weapons per year by 2009, proposed a number of steps to deal with this alarming prospect. Should diplomacy fail, he advocated launching a military attack on North Korea, even though potential targets had been dispersed and disguised and that a resulting war might kill tens of thousands of people in South Korea. Graham T. Allison, *Nuclear*

Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe (New York: Times Books, 2004), pp. 165–71.

60. One study asked Americans about their reaction to a “savage” invasion of a country friendly to the United States by an aggressor under two conditions: that the aggressor had nuclear weapons or that it did not. It found that 30 percent of respondents were strongly in favor of using force against the aggressor if it did not have nuclear weapons, but 52 percent if it did. Richard K. Herrmann, Philip E. Tetlock, and Penny S. Visser, “Mass Public Decisions to Go to War: A Cognitive-Interactionist Framework,” *American Political Science Review* 93, no. 3 (September 1999): 557, 559. For a similar result in a recent study, see Alida R. Haworth, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino, “What Do Americans Really Think about Conflict with Nuclear North Korea? The Answer Is Both Reassuring and Disturbing,” *Bulletin of the Atomic*

Scientists 75, no. 4 (June 24, 2019): 182.

61. It is also worth noting that the alliance means there are American troops in the area to be killed or captured in the event of a North Korea response. But this presents a danger for South Korea because, in the event that some Americans are killed, the United States might launch an impetuous attack on the North—perhaps with as little concentrated thought as it gave to attacking Afghanistan and Iraq—an attack that might have dire consequences for the South. American troops stationed in Korea are thus a “tripwire” in a special sense, one that is alarming to some South Koreans.

62. See also John Glaser, “Status, Prestige, Activism and the Illusion of American Decline,” *Washington Quarterly* (Spring 2018): 173–97.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS FROM THE CATO INSTITUTE

Building a Modern Military: The Force Meets Geopolitical Realities by Eric Gomez, Christopher A. Preble, Lauren Sander, and Brandon Valeriano, White Paper (May 26, 2020)

Ineffective, Immoral, Politically Convenient: America's Overreliance on Economic Sanctions and What to Do about It by Richard Hanania, Policy Analysis no. 884 (February 18, 2020)

The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: The Failure of Regime-Change Operations by Benjamin Denison, Policy Analysis no. 883 (January 6, 2020)

Avoiding a Korean Calamity: Why Resolving the Dispute with Pyongyang Requires Keeping the Peace by Doug Bandow, Policy Analysis no. 840 (April 16, 2018)

Withdrawing from Overseas Bases: Why a Forward-Deployed Military Posture Is Unnecessary, Outdated, and Dangerous by John Glaser, Policy Analysis no. 816 (July 18, 2017)

Will China Solve the North Korea Problem? The United States Should Develop a Diplomatic Strategy to Persuade Beijing to Help by Doug Bandow, Policy Analysis no. 806 (December 6, 2016)

**RECENT STUDIES IN THE
CATO INSTITUTE POLICY ANALYSIS SERIES**

892. **“Money as a Weapons System”: The Promises and Pitfalls of Foreign Defense Contracting** by Renanah Miles Joyce and Brian Blankenship (June 3, 2020)
891. **Rightsizing Fed Ed: Principles for Reform and Practical Steps to Move in the Right Direction** by Mary Clare Amselem, Lindsey Burke, Jonathan Butcher, Jamie Gass, Neal McCluskey, and Theodor Rebarber (May 4, 2020)
890. **Illegal Immigrant Incarceration Rates, 2010–2018: Demographics and Policy Implications** by Michelangelo Landgrave and Alex Nowrasteh (April 21, 2020)
889. **Transit: The Urban Parasite** by Randal O’Toole (April 20, 2020)
888. **The Case for Congressional Regulatory Review** by William Yeatman (April 14, 2020)
887. **The Development Dimension: What to Do about Differential Treatment in Trade** by James Bacchus and Inu Manak (April 13, 2020)
886. **Environmental Costs of the Jones Act** by Timothy Fitzgerald (March 2, 2020)
885. **Maryland’s BOOST Is Promising, but More Work Is Needed** by Russell Rhine (February 26, 2020)
884. **Ineffective, Immoral, Politically Convenient: America’s Overreliance on Economic Sanctions and What to Do about It** by Richard Hanania (February 18, 2020)
883. **The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: The Failure of Regime-Change Operations** by Benjamin Denison (January 6, 2020)
882. **Rust Buckets: How the Jones Act Undermines U.S. Shipbuilding and National Security** by Colin Grabow (November 12, 2019)
881. **Exploring Wealth Inequality** by Chris Edwards and Ryan Bourne (November 5, 2019)
880. **The Problems with Economic Integration and Controlled Choice** by David J. Armor (September 24, 2019)
879. **Legal Immigration Will Resolve America’s Real Border Problems** by David Bier (August 20, 2019)

878. **Overcoming Inertia: Why It's Time to End the War in Afghanistan** by John Glaser and John Mueller (August 13, 2019)
877. **Bailouts, Capital, or CoCos: Can Contingent Convertible Bonds Help Banks Cope with Financial Stress?** by Robert A. Eisenbeis (July 30, 2019)
876. **Challenging the Social Media Moral Panic: Preserving Free Expression under Hypertransparency** by Milton Mueller (July 23, 2019)
875. **The Community Reinvestment Act in the Age of Fintech and Bank Competition** by Diego Zuluaga (July 10, 2019)
874. **Closing Pandora's Box: The Growing Abuse of the National Security Rationale for Restricting Trade** by Simon Lester and Huan Zhu (June 25, 2019)
873. **Immigration Wait Times from Quotas Have Doubled: Green Card Backlogs Are Long, Growing, and Inequitable** by David J. Bier (June 18, 2019)
872. **Is This Time Different? Schumpeter, the Tech Giants, and Monopoly Fatalism** by Ryan Bourne (June 17, 2019)
871. **Unplugging the Third Rail: Choices for Affordable Medicare** by John F. Early (June 6, 2019)
870. **Principles for the 2020 Surface Transportation Reauthorization** by Randal O'Toole (June 4, 2019)
869. **A Reform Agenda for the Next Indian Government** by Swaminathan S. Anklesaria Aiyar (May 21, 2019)
868. **Restoring Responsible Government by Cutting Federal Aid to the States** by Chris Edwards (May 20, 2019)
867. **Making Sense of the Minimum Wage: A Roadmap for Navigating Recent Research** by Jeffrey Clemens (May 14, 2019)

CITATION

Mueller, John. "Nuclear Anti-Proliferation Policy and the Korea Conundrum: Some Policy Proposals." Policy Analysis No. 893, Cato Institute, Washington, DC, June 22, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.36009/PA.893>.