US President Donald J. Trump pursued a bold and unorthodox pathway when he initiated leader-to-leader summity with North Korean State Affairs Commission Chairman Kim Jong-un in 2018. But following three meetings—culminating in Trump’s June 30, 2019 surprise visit with Kim at the demilitarized zone (DMZ) dividing North and South Korea—the prospect that Trump’s personal relationship with Kim would generate tangible returns appears to have run its course. The North Koreans are more interested in US concessions and further legitimizing their nuclear capabilities than in implementing Kim’s 2018 pledges of “complete denuclearization” to Trump, Chinese President Xi Jinping, and South Korean President Moon Jae-in.¹

Observers have focused almost entirely on the resumption of talks now that summity has become an established pattern between Trump and Kim, paying much less attention to the lack of results and the implications of diplomatic failure by the United States and North Korea to define a pathway toward denuclearization. Moreover, North Korean pledges to return to talks within weeks of the June 30 Trump-Kim DMZ meeting have been replaced by a series of ever-increasing North Korean threats to pursue a new course of action in 2020, unless the United States offers “a new method of calculation” or concessions to replace the hardline approach the United States took in Hanoi. While the diplomats and leaders apply CPR to a negotiation process now apparently on life support, it is time to seriously consider the likelihood and necessity of pursuing a Plan B for managing the North Korean nuclear issue.
Discussion of a Plan B for North Korea has been constrained in part by the US desire for a peaceful denuclearization of North Korea through a diplomatic process and in part by fear that diplomatic failure would lead to the escalating tension and risk of confrontation that characterized the “fire and fury” days of 2017. During this time, successive missile tests revealed that North Korea was rapidly expanding its reach and targeting capability to include the continental United States. North Korea’s November 2017 declaration that it had achieved a nuclear capability sufficient to reach the United States and Kim’s 2018 summit diplomacy have reduced the likelihood of a confrontation, thus reducing discussion of other options. Meanwhile, through diplomatic outreach and the cessation of long-range missile and nuclear weapon tests, North Korea has sought to turn South Korea into a shield against US military action while strengthening strategic ties with China. The revival of Sino-North Korean ties after the June 2018 Trump-Kim summit in Singapore has eased economic pressure on the North, deflated the US-led maximum pressure campaign, and provided Kim with the space and time to cement his regime’s status as an unacknowledged nuclear power. North Korea’s de facto nuclear capabilities may not be officially accepted, since it is not one of the five acknowledged nuclear-weapons states under the 1970 nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), but they must be reckoned with.

A middle path between simple diplomatic failure and catastrophic military conflict has begun to emerge, once again relying on economic coercion to sharpen North Korea’s choice between economic prosperity and nuclear development. If US-North Korean diplomacy breaks down, as expected, the United States should implement a proactive containment strategy toward North Korea, reinforcing extended deterrence for South Korea and Japan to address rising doubts of US credibility, resurrecting and extending effective economic sanctions to recover effective economic pressure, and reinforcing a forward-deployed onshore strategic posture by expanding US strategic assets in and around the Korean peninsula to deter North Korea.

The End of Summit Diplomacy

Trump and Kim’s embrace of leader-level summity has carried promise and peril for both parties. It has opened new channels of dialogue and promised to steer the United States and North Korea away from conflict and confrontation by reopening a previously closed pathway to peaceful denuclearization. Most importantly, summit diplomacy was made possible by Kim Jong-un’s pledge to forego nuclear and missile tests and to unilaterally shut down nuclear and missile testing facilities at Punggye-ri and Dongchang-ri. But the leaders
ultimately could not find a way to close the gap between the US objective of North Korea’s denuclearization and the North Korean objective of establishing a normal relationship with the United States while remaining a nuclear state.

**L’Etat C’est Moi Diplomacy**

The June 12, 2018 Trump-Kim summit in Singapore provided a historic but ultimately insufficient beginning for renewed US-North Korean diplomacy. The Trump-Kim meeting seemingly confirmed Kim’s readiness to negotiate with the United States over denuclearization and identified a path to establish normal US-North Korea relations, achieve a permanent peace, denuclearize, and make progress in identifying and returning Korean War-era prisoners of war/missing in action (POW/MIAs). But North Korea’s reluctance to enter into working-level talks immediately following the summit and its resistance to involving technical experts on denuclearization suggests that Kim’s true strategic goal is not détente in exchange for the promised objective of working toward complete denuclearization, but rather the normalization of North Korea as a legitimate nuclear weapons state: i.e., détente without denuclearization.

Following the Singapore summit, North Korea rejected as premature US proposals made by Pompeo in his July 2018 visit to Pyongyang that North Korea provide a complete declaration of its nuclear materials as well as facilities and complained about the US failure to undertake corresponding measures, especially sanctions relief. North Korea used the September 2018 inter-Korean summit to make a counter-offer involving the return of international inspectors to Yongbyon, North Korea’s main nuclear development and fuel reprocessing complex, in exchange for sanctions relief and re-opening inter-Korean economic cooperation.

At the Hanoi summit on February 28, 2019, the Trump administration once again sought to clarify Kim’s commitment to denuclearization in concrete terms. Following working-level negotiations in which North Korean representatives were not authorized to even discuss specific issues surrounding denuclearization, Trump sought tangible commitments from Kim on the scope of inspections of the North Korean program, at and beyond Yongbyon. Kim came to Hanoi looking for sanctions relief, including the reversal of the five most recent UN Security Council sanctions resolutions (passed in 2016–17) that imposed sectoral sanctions that capped or banned North Korean exports. But faced with North Korean reluctance to take steps that would signal a commitment to complete rather than partial denuclearization, Trump decided to make “no deal” rather than a bad deal that would have traded closing the Yongbyon nuclear complex for lifting economic sanctions on North Korea.⁴
The Hanoi “no deal” summit appears to have induced a significant recalibration of Kim Jong-un’s nuclear strategy. For the first time, a North Korean leader faced a public failure bound to have domestic implications for perceptions of his leadership. It imposed a burden on Kim to restore the perception that he was negotiating with the United States from a position of strength rather than weakness. Rumors swirled about punishments and changes in Kim’s top negotiating team, and Kim gave a speech to the Supreme People’s Assembly in April 2019 demanding that the United States return to negotiations after adopting a “new way of calculation” and imposing an end-of-year deadline, after which North Korea would embark on an unspecified new course of action. Kim also resumed an exchange of letters with Trump in hopes of continuing to normalize the US-North Korea relationship without taking steps toward denuclearization. A subsequent shift in North Korean demands of the United States from sanctions relief to security guarantees emerged around Kim Jong-un’s April 2019 summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Kim’s strategy of maintaining communications with Trump generated an early pay-off in June 2019, when Kim responded to Trump’s tweet suggesting an impromptu meeting at the DMZ during Trump’s visit to South Korea. The realization of this diplomatic reality-TV moment single-handedly erased the narrative of failure post-Hanoi and revived the prospect of working-level nuclear talks. But it also generated an impression of over-eagerness on the US side that coincided with an apparent hardening of the North Korean position on steps toward denuclearization and more frequent North Korean media criticisms of South Korea and the United States. Following a series of delays in the promised resumption of working-level talks due to North Korean concerns about US-ROK joint military exercises and South Korean receipt of F-35s, the two sides convened a day of working-level meetings in Sweden in October 2019 against the backdrop of steady North Korean testing of short-range ballistic missile and an SLBM test. The talks ended with North Korean public expressions of disappointment and no immediate indication of whether or when talks might resume.

**Effectiveness of Summitry**

By pursuing summitry, Kim dramatically improved North Korea’s global position. Summitry enabled Kim to overcome international isolation and reduce the risk of
military confrontation with the United States. It enabled him to reduce hostility with South Korea and use the ROK as a buffer against the risks of a return to “fire and fury” with the United States. Summitry has provided Kim with these advantages at a relatively low cost, especially to the extent that he has avoided making any concrete concessions that could lead to North Korea’s denuclearization.

Most importantly, summitry has blunted the effects of maximum pressure by providing Beijing with a pretext for strategic reengagement with Kim and for easing the pressure of economic sanctions. With the prospect of strategic rapprochement between Trump and Kim Jong-un on the table, China has made an inevitable shift from alignment with US efforts to force a North Korean choice on denuclearization and support for crippling sanctions to a renewed geostrategic embrace of Kim Jong-un through the renewal of Xi-Kim summitry and accompanying economic benefits.

But summitry has also carried some costs for Kim. North Korea’s primary decision maker has now taken center stage, rather than pulling strings from behind the curtain like his father, Kim Jong-il. Kim’s pledges and intentions are now visible for all to see. If Kim’s pledges to work toward complete denuclearization are not realized, the blame will fall squarely on Kim himself.

Similarly, the United States has received some benefits from the 18 months of summit diplomacy, but the process has not come without costs. Establishing a relationship with Kim Jong-un has proven politically valuable to Trump as a unique accomplishment for a sitting US president, despite criticism that Trump has elevated and legitimized the Kim regime. Trump has been able to claim that he has removed the immediate risk of military conflict but only at the expense of progress in reducing North Korea’s nuclear threat. Trump’s failure to secure North Korea’s denuclearization, despite his relationship with Kim, enhances Trump’s vulnerability to North Korean threats to turn Trump’s boasts of political success into a strategic failure, particularly in an upcoming US election year. Still, Trump has leverage in the form of sanctions relief. Trump pledges relief will only be given to North Korea if it denuclearizes. But the risk remains that Trump’s perceived domestic political need might open the way for Kim Jong-un to offer a small deal (for example, closing Yongbyon nuclear facilities but not shuttering the entire nuclear program in return for easing core economic sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council) which could effectively amount to US acceptance of North Korea as a de facto nuclear state.

**Summitry has blunted the effects of maximum pressure by providing Beijing a pretext to shift.**
South Korea’s President Moon Jae-in initially looked to reap political gains by facilitating the DMZ meeting between Trump and Kim. But Moon’s successful intermediary role has turned sour to the extent that he apparently initially oversold to Trump Kim Jong-un’s willingness to denuclearize. Furthermore, Kim appears to have turned his back on Moon once it became clear that Moon would not offer economic benefits to North Korea without US approval. Moon has been marginalized to the position of cheerleader for Trump and Kim and stands to lose the most if his mediation efforts fail to bear fruit.

Chinese President Xi Jinping has benefited most from Kim’s turn to summitry. Summitry has removed the prospect of a US-North Korea military confrontation and opened the way for Xi to reengage with Kim and assert China’s indispensability to tension reduction on the Korean Peninsula. By holding five meetings with Kim Jong-un over sixteen months, Xi has neutralized the perceived but highly unlikely risk that North Korea and the United States would establish a strategic partnership at the expense of Chinese interests. However, strengthening the Sino-North Korea relationship has prioritized an accidental convergence of mutual strategic interests at the price of likely setbacks to prospects for North Korea’s denuclearization. The economic pressure that China applied following the last of eleven UN Security Council resolutions in November 2017 led to a virtual shutdown of North Korean exports in the first quarter of 2018, but that pressure was quickly eased following Trump’s announcement that he would meet Kim Jong-un in March 2018.

Trump, Kim, Xi, and Moon appear to prefer the status quo over dramatic change. Trump has not mentioned “complete denuclearization” since the June 2019 DMZ meeting, instead emphasizing the freeze on nuclear and missile tests for a freeze on US-ROK joint military exercises as his accomplishment. North Korea is interested in preserving its nuclear status rather than agreeing on complete denuclearization. There is no doubt that Kim wants to trade partial denuclearization measures for sanctions relief as a tangible expression of a security guarantee for North Korea. Even Moon does not want to change the status quo. He appears more interested in inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation, with the United States easing economic sanctions in return for North Korea’s commitment to dismantling nuclear facilities at Yongbyon.

Plan B for the Nuclear Problem

The problem is that North Korea is on the verge of moving into advanced nuclear status with the possession of nuclear-capable ICBMs. In April 2019, Kim announced in his speech to North Korea’s Supreme People’s Assembly that he had given the United States until the year’s end to break the deadlock in
the stalled nuclear talks. As it becomes clearer that diplomatic negotiations offer no realistic prospect for achieving the promised objective of complete denuclearization at this time, it is incumbent upon South Korea and the United States to prepare a Plan B for the North Korean nuclear problem rather than relying solely on the Trump-Kim relationship.

The United States, in particular, should pursue a Plan B strategy that seeks to achieve the following objectives through a proactive containment strategy: 1) shore up the credibility of US extended deterrence by taking the measures necessary to demonstrate to US allies that the United States is ready and willing to defend them against the threat of a nuclear North Korea; 2) impose a level of economic sanctions sufficient to induce North Korea to choose between economic prosperity and nuclear weapons; and 3) reaffirm a US forward-deployed onshore strategic posture to close the geostrategic gaps that North Korea will likely seek to exploit through nuclear brinkmanship.

**Strengthened US Extended Deterrence**

If North Korea has developed the capability to target the US mainland with nuclear weapons, extended deterrence calculations will inevitably be influenced. This shift would drive US allies to develop new capabilities to the extent that they perceive weakness or an absence of political resolve from the United States. A proven North Korean capacity to target the continental United States will likely have a severe impact on the credibility of US extended deterrence. The United States may have the capability and will to defend regional allies, but a conflict on the Korean peninsula is unlikely to threaten its national survival. War, however, poses a threat to the very survival of North Korea and its neighbors. This asymmetry of interests exposes a fundamental challenge for US extended deterrence against a nuclear-armed North Korea, driving home a perception gap that Pyongyang will surely seek to exploit. North Korea may think it can raise the potential cost of conflict beyond what the United States is willing to accept by threatening a nuclear attack, thereby persuading the United States to agree to an outcome on Pyongyang's terms.

It is naive to assume that North Korea has yet to develop an ICBM capability. North Korea demonstrated heat skin and ablative shielding technologies when it launched the long-range *Hwasong*-12 missile, equipped with PBV (Post Boost Vehicle) in 2017, meaning that it is reasonable to assume that North Korea has essentially acquired the reentry capability necessary for an ICBM that can credibly target the US mainland. If North Korea can target US cities with nuclear weapons, Shane Smith of the US National Defense University has pointed out that a triangular decoupling strategy would become possible: North Korea could seek to decouple the ROK-US alliance by giving South Korea...
reason to question whether the United States would risk San Francisco or Los Angeles in defense of Seoul or Busan. North Korea might also think that by threatening Japan with mid-range Rodong nuclear missiles, the United States would be forced to choose between allies (either leaving Korea without a US nuclear umbrella or exposing Japan under North Korean mid-range nuclear missile attack by supporting US efforts to defend the ROK) and would be reluctant to risk Japan over a fight on the Korean Peninsula.11

If US extended nuclear deterrence loses credibility, or momentum builds toward decoupling due to North Korea’s expanded ICBM capabilities, both South Korea and Japan could be tempted to develop their own nuclear weapons. Former UK Defense Secretary Denis Healey said in his memoir that during the Cold War it took only 5 percent credibility of American retaliation to deter the Soviets, but 95 percent to reassure the Europeans.12 If the US government does not sufficiently assure the South Korean government of the credibility of US extended deterrence by increasing its strategic assets in East Asia, it may find itself reexamining the redeployment of US tactical nuclear weapons in South Korea or considering the possibility of a NATO-type nuclear sharing arrangement within the context of strengthened extended deterrence by the United States.13 The United States could strengthen US extended deterrence in Asia by deploying more strategic assets in and around South Korea and Japan.14

Since US extended deterrence generally operates at higher levels of conflict, the United States should further invest in coordination, planning, and joint communications with South Korea and Japan to send a strong message to Pyongyang that, alongside its allies, the United States can and will effectively respond to and dominate all levels of conflict. Such coordination would entail US allies taking on increased roles in response to a broader range of North Korean provocations, with US support. The United States should do its best to assure its allies while reinforcing its deterrence and defense capabilities to counteract North Korean nuclear missiles. The United States should also work toward an integrated missile defense capability with Japan and South Korea to neutralize North Korea’s triangular decoupling strategy.

**Strengthened Economic Sanctions on North Korea**
An essential element of a proactive containment response to the failure of diplomacy would be the need to recover and surpass the levels of economic pressure that the Trump administration brought to bear in its first year through

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82  THE WASHINGTON QUARTERLY ■ WINTER 2020
unprecedentedly stringent UN Security Council resolutions and strengthened unilateral US sanctions against North Korea. Maximum pressure was a critical factor that influenced Kim to pursue summit diplomacy, along with the successes of North Korea’s missile program in 2017 that allowed North Korea to project the appearance that it was negotiating from a position of strength with the credible ability to strike the US mainland. But North Korean sanction evasion tactics as well as relaxed Chinese attention and political will on sanctions implementation toward the DPRK have blunted the effectiveness of economic pressure in the past two years.

UN Security Council resolutions remain in place as a foundation on which to build economic pressure on North Korea. But anecdotal evidence from the China-North Korea border areas reveals relaxed Chinese inspections and restrictions on China-North Korea border trade and a clear recovery in Chinese exports to North Korea since the high point of Chinese sanctions enforcement in early 2018, in line with the improved leader-level relations between Xi and Kim. Relaxed Chinese border controls allow illegal dual-use goods and luxury items to pass more easily through Chinese customs because individual shipments may not be inspected to ensure that container contents are consistent with reporting on container manifests.

In addition, China has become complicit in North Korean sanctions evasion efforts, most visibly by turning a blind eye to North Korean ship-to-ship transfers of petroleum products, which often involve Chinese ships and occur in Chinese territorial waters. Such transfers have persisted and become regularized despite detailed US reporting of such violations to the UN Security Council Panel of Experts on North Korea. Russia and China rejected the conclusions of this reporting, claiming that the evidence was insufficient for the Panel of Experts to take further actions.

To be successful, the economic dimension of proactive containment would require the renewal and strengthening of cooperation with China. This cooperation would aim to impose targeted economic sanctions similar to those China imposed at the end of 2017, which dramatically decreased Chinese trade with North Korea. Ultimately, the US goal would be to persuade China to join a proactive containment coalition designed to convince Pyongyang’s leaders that the risks of a nuclear North Korea are intolerable to the region and the world. If the United States is not successful, it may pursue economic coercion unilaterally, imposing sanctions against North Korean economic partners to
isolate North Korea from the international trade and financial flows necessary for its economic survival.

It is worth noting that recently intensified US-China strategic competition will negatively influence North Korean nuclear negotiations. US-China cooperation on sanctions has comprised an essential element of the US strategy to push North Korea toward denuclearization by forcing North Korea to make a strategic choice between economic prosperity and nuclear development. The passage of UN sanctions resolutions targeting North Korea would have been impossible without Chinese support. North Korea will be highly tempted to try to drive a wedge between the United States and China to take advantage of Sino-US rising strategic competition. China indeed views North Korea through the lens of strategic competition with the United States, so the North Korea nuclear issue cannot be isolated from other regional strategic issues such as trade, Taiwan, and the East and South China Seas. China will likely seek to preserve North Korea as a strategic buffer against the United States unless the United States makes a concession on regional strategic issues important to China.

The United States should continue to press for more effective implementation of UNSC resolutions on North Korea at the UN Security Council. But if the United States cannot convince China and Russia that North Korea’s nuclear program is a sufficiently grave threat to the international community, then it must treat Russia and China as spoilers that have decided to enable North Korea’s nuclear program. Under these circumstances, the United States would have no choice but to directly punish North Korea’s economic partners that have enabled its sanctions evasion. South Korea should join fortified international cooperation among the United States, Canada, Australia, and Japan to monitor North Korea’s illicit trans-shipment of oil and other goods on the seas around the Korean Peninsula.

Absent Chinese and Russian cooperation, the most likely instruments for ramping up economic pressure will likely come from the US Congress. Already, there are a range of bills on Capitol Hill that would provide the authority and legal basis for the US Treasury to pursue a wide range of secondary sanctions on North Korean suppliers, most of which are in Russia or China. Such legislation would build on the foundation of the North Korean Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act of 2016 and the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017, which expanded US Treasury authorities to designate North Korean commercial and shipping entities as sanctions violators.

Current Congressional legislation designed to increase pressure on North Korea includes the Otto Warmbier Banking Restrictions Involving North Korea (BRINK) Act, which the Senate passed in June 2019 as part of the FY2020 National Defense Authorization Act. The legislation “imposes mandatory sanctions on the foreign banks and companies that facilitate illicit financial
transactions” with North Korea. The House passed an amended 2020 NDAA in September 2019, and the Senate and House are now reconciling differences in the two bills through the conference committee process. If adopted by both houses of Congress, the new legislation would provide a legal basis for the United States to take unilateral actions against North Korean partners in China, Russia, and other countries, reducing the tacit protections that such companies enjoy in the event that the Chinese and Russian governments decide to look the other way.

Reaffirmed US Onshore Strategic Posture
The continuation of a US forward presence is important. The United States has played a leadership role in maintaining the liberal international order since World War II through the forward deployment of US forces overseas. Onshore balancing, enabled by strong military alliances, constitutes an important pillar of US international power and should be used for mutual strategic, not transactional, gains between the United States and its allies. Strengthened US extended deterrence and a rebolstered economic sanctions regime will not be successful if the United States shifts to an offshore balancing strategy that aims to reduce or withdraw the US force presence in South Korea and Japan.

A nightmare scenario for South Korea as it faces an increasing threat of nuclear brinkmanship from North Korea would be a dramatic US strategic shift under an America first banner from onshore balancing (forward deployment to deter aggression from a target state) to offshore balancing (deterrence of the target state from a greater distance). Proponents of offshore balancing argue that Washington can concentrate on vital US national interests such as preserving US dominance in the Western Hemisphere and countering potential hegemons in Europe, Northeast Asia, and the Persian Gulf. They claim that instead of policing the world, the United States should encourage other countries to take the lead in checking rising powers, intervening itself only when necessary.

Taking into account Trump’s numerous skeptical remarks on US military presence in foreign countries, the probability of a radical strategic shift from an onshore to an offshore strategic posture is not low. He believes that allies are free-riding on the US military presence and consistently calls for them to pay for more, if not all, of the cost of US forces. In a speech at the Pennsylvania Petrochemicals Complex on August 14, 2019, for example, he expressed deep distrust in alliances by saying “U.S. allies take advantage of the U.S. more than

Extended deterrence and economic sanctions will not be successful if the US shifts to offshore balancing.
enemies.”21 Earlier reports in 2018 indicated that, in private discussions, Trump had repeatedly questioned the strategic necessity of keeping troops in South Korea.22 His negative perception of both alliances and the forward deployment of US forces could lead to a bad deal with Kim, who wants to trade “some” of his nukes for the withdrawal of US troops from South Korea. Therefore, a US onshore balancing strategy in Northeast Asia will be badly needed to contain North Korea’s nuclear brinkmanship and to deal with the growing coalition between China and Russia aimed at disrupting US-Japan-ROK security cooperation.

To force North Korea to abandon a nuclear brinkmanship strategy, the United States and its allies should seek to prevent Pyongyang from profiting from nuclear extortion and criminal activities. Impeding North Korea’s ability to successfully strike the United States or its allies with nuclear and cyber weapons, either through countervailing defense measures or credible deterrence, will reduce North Korea’s leverage and options.23

A nuclear-capable North Korea might make a limited surprise attack on South Korean-controlled islands below the Northern Limit Line (for instance, North Korean commandos taking Baekryong Island in the West Sea and holding 6,000 residents as hostages) and use nuclear threats to deter American intervention on South Korea’s behalf. If, on the other hand, this kind of North Korean military provocation were to take place while the United States, South Korea, and Japan were pursuing a proactive containment strategy—but without a forward-deployed US presence on the Korean Peninsula, it would be extremely difficult for the South Korean government to respond immediately to a nuclear-armed North Korea, and the primary US concern would likely be the risk of escalation into a major war. The South Korean public would then question the credibility of US extended deterrence and demand that the South Korean government pursue nuclear armament, forcing decoupling of the two US alliances and weakening deterrence against an augmented North Korean threat. Robust US military presence on South Korea and Japan that prevents North Korea from conducting a surprise attack combined with its nuclear brinkmanship will thus be badly needed.

The Best of Bad Options Returns

No deal is inadequate, a bad deal would be costly, and a comprehensive nuclear deal with North Korea appears nearly impossible. Many analysts praised the Hanoi no deal summit because it avoided the pitfalls that would accompany inadequate, self-initiated North Korean gestures toward denuclearization.24 But the summit also revealed the risks of continued diplomatic stalemate and
indefinite deferral of a US-North Korean denuclearization agreement, which ultimately would lead to tacit acceptance of a nuclear-capable North Korea without formal affirmation of North Korea’s nuclear status. North Korea continues to pursue the possibility that Trump might make a bad deal by the end of 2020 motivated by short-term political interest at the expense of North Korea’s long-term denuclearization, while simultaneously showing a willingness to kick the can down the road indefinitely by stringing out denuclearization negotiations.

High-level summity among the leaders of the United States, South Korea, and North Korea has served as an invaluable tool for clarifying the overall political and security situation on the Korean Peninsula, but it has not generated prospects for agreement or closed the gap on denuclearization between the United States and North Korea. Instead, hopes for a denuclearization-and-peace deal generated by the Singapore summit have not yet been realized. Kim Jong-un’s charm initiative has worked to relieve immediate pressure on North Korea, but he has also made a commitment to complete denuclearization that may conflict with his real goal of normalizing, if not legitimizing, North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. The process has exposed Kim’s motives sufficiently to warrant pursuit of a proactive containment strategy as a necessary next step in the absence of satisfactory progress in US-North Korea negotiations.

The failure of diplomacy will generate pressure on the United States to revert to maximum pressure, including efforts to ramp up sanctions as the most effective and least costly instrument by which to generate coercion in response to North Korea’s nuclear intransigence. The most reasonable Plan B for responding to the failure of diplomacy is proactive containment, which shores up US extended deterrence, redoubles economic sanctions on North Korea, and counters the prospect of North Korean nuclear brinkmanship.

Continued pressure on the United States to demonstrate the credibility of extended deterrence commitments to defend South Korea and Japan from a nuclear North Korea will emerge as a direct consequence of continued diplomatic stalemate and failure. The United States will need to recover the leverage on North Korea that helped create an opening for diplomacy by reconstituting effective economic sanctions through a redoubled maximum pressure strategy. Most importantly, the United States should continue to show its commitment to alliances by maintaining onshore balancing (forward deployment) rather than shifting to a complacent offshore balancing (withdrawal of US forces) strategy in Northeast Asia.
The window of opportunity created by Trump-Kim summitry is closing. Unless a plausible process can be established in pursuit of complete denuclearization, North Korea will seek to utilize its nuclear status to further marginalize South Korea while playing China and the United States off each other. If this process cannot be established, even more catastrophic policy options than we now have will become the only remaining courses of action.

Notes


14. US strategic assets refer to high-profile weapons usually from its bases in Guam, Japan, or the mainland, such as B-2, B-1B, and B-52 bombers as well as F-35 fighter jets and aircraft carriers.


