How should the United States approach the Korean Peninsula and the problem of North Korean nuclear proliferation? Since its initial test in October 2006, North Korea has conducted five more, increasing the estimated yield with each one. Pyongyang’s September 2017 nuclear test—which they claimed was a thermonuclear device—had an estimated yield of between 50–280 kilotons, a significant increase from previous tests. Perhaps more alarming to U.S. policymakers, the North has surged forward with its missile program, conducting 15 missile tests in 2015, 24 in 2016, and thus far 19 missile tests in the first 10 months of 2017. The missile program rose to the height of U.S. policy concern in July 2017, when the North successfully tested the Hwasong-14, its first truly intercontinental ballistic missile, with an estimated range as great as 6,500 miles (10,400 km). Discussion has arisen as to whether, or increasingly when, North Korea will be able to marry these two technologies, and successfully mount a miniaturized nuclear warhead on a medium- or even long-range missile. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) has concluded that Pyongyang has already reached this milestone, potentially putting Los Angeles, Denver, and Chicago within nuclear striking distance. Thus, time is of the essence, and more clearly on North Korea’s side as they move steadily toward a significantly more robust and threatening nuclear capability.

Many have discussed the dilemmas the United States faces on the Korean Peninsula—the difficult but necessary tradeoffs between various competing objectives that accompany any policy decision. However, as it has long been and is
currently framed, the United States faces not merely a set of dilemmas with its North Korea policy, but a “trilemma”: a situation in which it has three primary objectives, but for logical and practical reasons it can, at best, achieve just two of them at once. U.S. foreign policy has long simultaneously sought the denuclearization of North Korea, to maintain the U.S.-ROK alliance and its position of forward-deployment on the Korean Peninsula, and to avoid the costs associated with counterproliferation military action. Yet as the analysis below will show, selecting any two of these options means a third must be abandoned. Given that, the least costly short-run option seems to be for the United States to maintain the alliance as well as its position of forward-deployment and to avoid the costs associated with counterproliferation by force. In short, it is likely that the United States will have to abandon North Korean denuclearization as the defining element of its approach to the Korean Peninsula, and to accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state.

Denuclearization, Deployment, and Avoiding War

The United States has long had three primary objectives in its approach to the North Korean nuclear program. The first of these is its call for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of the North Korean nuclear program—what became known during the Bush administration as “CVID.” From the very early days of the United States’ awareness of the North Korean nuclear weapons program, its approach has been guided by this fundamental goal. The ultimate objective of denuclearization was the driving force behind the Clinton administration’s “Agreed Framework” and behind the Bush administration’s “Six-Party Talks.”

CVID is and has long been the number one U.S. policy priority on the Korean Peninsula.

With nearly each and every major nuclear program-related development in the North, top U.S. policymakers have been sure to emphasize this aim of denuclearization. After the North’s first test in 2006, President Bush claimed that such actions would not “weaken the resolve of the United States and our allies to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.” After the North’s September 2016 test, President Obama emphasized: “To be clear, the United States does not, and never will, accept North Korea as a nuclear state.” And President Trump, just weeks after North Korea’s September 2017 nuclear test, similarly noted that with “North Korea, our goal is denuclearization. We cannot allow this dictatorship to threaten our nation or our allies with
unimaginable loss of life. We will do what we must do to prevent that from happening. In short, CVID is and has long been the number one U.S. policy priority on the Korean Peninsula.

The second U.S. objective is maintaining its alliance with the Republic of Korea (ROK) and its position of forward-deployment on the Korean Peninsula. The U.S. military has been deployed on the peninsula since the onset of the Korean War in 1950, averaging around 50,000 troops throughout most of the Cold War and sitting at roughly 24,000 today. For its part, the U.S.-ROK military alliance has been in force since 1953 and remains a cornerstone—or as it is often referred to, a “lynchpin”—of U.S. foreign policy in East Asia. Besides allowing the United States to project power into the region and deterring an attack on the South, the alliance and deployment are often argued to have the additional benefit of helping maintain South Korea’s non-nuclear status.

The United States’ commitments to the alliance and to forward-deployment are also often emphasized during times of crisis on the peninsula. For instance, during his final visit to Asia as president, as the North was gearing up for a nuclear test, President Obama made sure to “reaffirm that our commitment to the defense and security of South Korea, including extended deterrence, is unwavering.” And while President Trump has taken a highly unconventional approach to the U.S.-ROK alliance, often focusing on criticism of the U.S.-Korea free trade agreement (KORUS-FTA), members of his cabinet have tended to toe the line of past precedent. During a visit to Asia in April 2017, Vice President Pence was unequivocal in “express[ing] the unwavering support of the United States for our longstanding alliance with South Korea.” In the wake of the North’s ICBM tests of 2017, Secretary of State Tillerson also reaffirmed the U.S.’s “ironclad commitment” to the alliance, and Secretary of Defense Mattis stressed that the “defense relationship … [is] more important than ever.” Thus, forward-deployment on the Korean Peninsula and maintaining the U.S.-ROK alliance are seen as crucial U.S. foreign policy objectives in the region.

The United States’ third core objective is to avoid the costs associated with a military counterproliferation operation that—given the size, structure, and sophistication of the North Korean nuclear program—would likely entail an invasion and forcible regime change on the part of the United States. While this objective is not one that is typically announced in public, the option of forcible regime change has been “on the table” for decades, and yet has been assiduously avoided as the United States has opted for less costly alternatives. During the 1993–94 North Korean nuclear crisis, President Clinton was famously stunned when told that a second Korean War would cause one million casualties, cost the United States $100 billion, and lead to $1 trillion in industrial damage. Then-Secretary of Defense William Perry referred to the choice between a potentially nuclear North Korea and war on the Korean Peninsula as choosing “between
a disaster and a catastrophe.” Since then, considerations of the potential costs have been similarly sobering, with estimated casualties in the hundreds of thousands, even millions, over the course of months of intense combat.

A first problem for the United States is that finding and destroying North Korea’s nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programs would be no simple feat. Unlike the nascent and highly geographically concentrated programs that were destroyed in Iraq in 1981 and Syria in 2007, the North Korean WMD program consists of hundreds of facilities dispersed widely throughout the country including reactors, enrichment facilities, warhead storage and stockpile locations, chemical and biological weapons production sites, launch and test sites, airfields, command-and-control centers, and research-and-development facilities. While the location of many of these facilities is known to U.S. intelligence, others—such as the storage locations of as many as 30 nuclear warheads—are shrouded in a great deal more mystery. And even in the highly unlikely event that the United States could find and surgically destroy the North’s entire nuclear infrastructure, it could not destroy the knowledge base and technical know-how of the program. This would allow a surviving North Korean regime to ultimately rebuild.

A second problem is that North Korean artillery roughly forty miles across the border from Seoul act as a strong deterrent to military action, being able to strike the South Korean capital in mere minutes, potentially killing thousands if not tens of thousands in the first few hours of conflict. Third, as a weak state with a limited nuclear program perceiving its impending destruction, North Korea would face powerful incentives to launch one or more of its nuclear devices in an act of desperation, potentially hitting South Korea, Japan, Guam, or even Hawaii or the continental United States in the process. In sum, while at times the temptation to apply a military solution to the North Korean nuclear problem has been present, all presidents since and including Clinton have eagerly sought to avoid this alternative.

Thus, the United States has long had three primary objectives with respect to the North Korean nuclear program: CVID, forward-deployment, and avoiding a costly forcible regime change. And it holds these objectives simultaneously, aiming to “have it all” in its North Korea policy. To be sure, on their own each of these objectives is achievable. In fact, any two of the three of them are likely to be jointly achievable. However, as I will show below, the way these objectives interact in practice today means that no more than two at a time are viable. This is the United States’ North Korean nuclear trilemma.

**America’s North Korean Nuclear Trilemma**

The idea of a trilemma—also referred to as an “impossible trinity” or “inconsistent triad”—is an old one, but typically refers to a situation in which there are three
favorable objectives, but only two of which can be met simultaneously. A well-known example of a trilemma comes from macroeconomics. The argument here is that policymakers in the global economy want stable exchange rates, free capital mobility, and control over their monetary policy, but can only have two out of these three options at once. Thus, having exchange rate stability and capital mobility means that monetary policy control must be abandoned, just as having capital mobility and control over monetary policy entails that exchange rates must be allowed to float. Choosing any two means that the third has to be given up.\textsuperscript{22}

In attempting to deal with North Korean nuclear proliferation, the United States faces a comparable quandary. When carefully considering together the three primary U.S. goals of denuclearization, forward-deployment, and avoiding the costs of forcible regime change, it becomes clear that American policymakers will have to choose two.

First consider options one and two: CVID and forward-deployment. These two priorities can be jointly maintained, but only if the United States is willing to accept the costs associated with a counterproliferation operation on the Korean Peninsula. This is because the United States’ forward-deployment and the voluntary abandonment by North Korea of its nuclear program are inherently incompatible. North Korea’s nuclear weapons program is primarily motivated by the presence of the global hegemon, the United States, militarily deployed on its southern border. While the North may have other motivations for pursuing nuclear weapons—such as the specific foreign policies of the United States and South Korea, its own domestic political incentives, and revisionist intentions—the evidence suggests that the simple facts of the United States’ overwhelming power and its deployment on the Korean Peninsula are the most important.\textsuperscript{23}

Consider the fact that North Korean nuclear proliferation has largely been a constant over the years,\textsuperscript{24} but many of these other factors—such as U.S. political and economic engagement, inter-Korean negotiations and trade, and North Korean domestic political alignments—have varied a great deal. This suggests that there is an unmoving, more fundamental cause in play (i.e., the power and proximity of the United States). And the evidence that North Korea intends to build its nuclear arsenal as a shield behind which to engage in revisionist foreign policy is similarly weak. For instance, between 1995 and 2005, North Korea averaged nearly six conventional (non-missile, non-nuclear) militarized provocations annually. However, between 2006 and 2016, after its first nuclear
test, this number dropped to less than three, indicating that its nuclear program has made it less provocative with its conventional military, not more so.\textsuperscript{25}

In short, the North Korean nuclear weapons program appears to be intended to do what nuclear weapons do best—deter both conventional and nuclear attacks from powerful external rivals. Thus, keeping U.S. troops in place and the U.S.-ROK alliance in force while demanding the North’s denuclearization essentially means that the United States will have to be willing to engage in forcible regime change. Since the presence of the United States makes it highly unlikely that North Korea will voluntarily abandon its nuclear program, the only option for CVID to succeed would be removal by force or movement off of the peninsula and U.S. abandonment of its South Korean ally.

Next, consider options two and three: forward-deployment and avoiding a costly regime change. If these two are the United States’ primary goals, CVID clearly cannot be added to the mix, because—as outlined above—the very presence of the United States on the peninsula has been the primary motivator of the North Korean nuclear program. Some might hope that a strategic bluff is the answer here: with the United States threatening attack to pressure the North into abandoning its program. However, because of the overwhelming costs associated with the use of force outlined above, such threats would, at best, be deemed non-credible and would therefore be largely ineffective. At worst, they \textit{would} be seen as credible, prompting “use-it-or-lose-it” incentives in Pyongyang and threatening a preemptive nuclear launch by the North—the very outcome the bluff was intended to avoid. Thus, if the United States would like to have complete denuclearization as its preeminent foreign policy goal on the Korean Peninsula, then it will have to consider either moving U.S. troops out of South Korea, and even abrogating the alliance, or being willing to remove the nuclear weapons program—and likely the North Korean regime along with it—by force, and accepting all of the costs that would entail. Again, just two of these three options are simultaneously workable.

Finally, consider options one and three: CVID and avoiding the costs associated with counterproliferation by force. These two options could potentially be maintained in tandem, but not if the United States hopes to retain its position of forward-deployment on the Korean Peninsula and its alliance with South Korea. Since North Korea is highly unlikely to voluntarily abandon its nuclear program as long as the United States is forward-deployed and allied with the South, realistically maintaining CVID and avoiding a costly forcible regime change means the United States would have to move offshore and even consider abrogating its alliance commitments to the South. Not all three of these goals can be maintained at once.
Counterarguments

Some may balk at these arguments. Surely, they would claim, there are ways in which all three of these options can be maintained at once. For instance, some might argue that China is the key to North Korean denuclearization. As the only country with important diplomatic, military, and especially economic ties with the North, they could argue that China is well-positioned to use the kind of leverage that would enable the United States to maintain all three of its central objectives. It is certainly true that China has important leverage over the North. But it is also the case that China has its own interests on the Korean Peninsula, and they are sharply at odds with those of the United States.

While the Chinese would undoubtedly prefer a non-nuclear North Korea, there are two things from China’s perspective that are worse than the status quo. First, a catastrophic collapse of the North Korean regime, leading to massive refugee flows, loose nuclear weapons, and the potential for large-scale military intervention by outside powers. And second, sharing an 880-mile (1,420 km) border with an eventually unified, U.S.-allied, and possibly nuclear “Greater Korea.” Therefore, from China’s perspective, having a deeply dependent, relatively stable, and generally friendly nuclear-armed North Korea as a “buffer” between itself and U.S. forces in the South will continue to be preferable to any drastic change on the peninsula.

Critics might alternatively argue that the problem is one of policy. They could claim that if the United States merely engaged North Korea in a serious way—politically, economically, and militarily—it would be able to maintain these three options simultaneously. Ratcheting down the threats to the North, engaging it politically, and creating deep economic ties, they could argue, would make the United States’ proximity less threatening, and for North Korea, its nuclear program less attractive. However, the record of U.S. engagement with the North has simply not borne this out. Neither during the “Agreed Framework” years under Clinton, the “Six-Party Talks” under Bush, nor with the Obama administration initially coming to office willing to “extend a hand” has the North shown a serious willingness to abandon its nuclear program. But this should not be at all surprising. Given the United States’ immense power and its position of forward-deployment on the Korean Peninsula (not to mention its penchant for toppling relatively weak, non-nuclear, autocratic regimes), any attempt to reduce threats and increase incentives for North Korea to abandon its nuclear program would likely fall flat.

Some might also argue that CVID, forward-deployment, and avoiding forcible regime change can be simultaneously maintained because it is only a matter of time before North Korea collapses under its own weight. Thus, they could posit, the United States can simply bide its time while the North Korean regime runs its course. Of course anything can happen, but when it comes to the collapse of the...
North Korean regime, I would not bet on it anytime soon. The immanent collapse of North Korea has been predicted since at least the 1990s, and yet it has managed to defy all expectations for decades, withstanding two generational transitions of the Kim dynasty. Furthermore, as noted at the outset, with North Korea quickly advancing toward a more robust nuclear deterrent capability, time seems to be more clearly on their side. Given these circumstances, it would seem unwise to base U.S. policy on the predicted sudden disappearance of the North Korean regime. And given all of the costs and complications that such a “hard landing” scenario would likely entail, this is not something we should be eagerly anticipating.

Finally, critics might argue that there are intermediate options: Perhaps the North could be convinced to halt its nuclear progress in exchange for political, economic, and security concessions from the United States. This has been the basis of China’s “double freeze” proposal: North Korea would freeze its nuclear and missile development, while the United States and South Korea would freeze joint military exercises. And simply stopping the North’s nuclear progress, it would be argued, would be an important step forward. I agree that a freeze of the program would be a positive development from the United States’ perspective. Yet this merely bolsters the arguments made above. If the United States were willing to accept a “freeze” of the nuclear program as an acceptable outcome, then it would, in effect, be abandoning CVID in favor of forward-deployment and the avoidance of the use of force—a clear indication of the trilemma at work.

Even U.S. arguments against the double freeze suggest the existence of a trilemma. Many argue that a freeze in joint military exercises is unacceptable because it would compromise the United State’s commitment to its South Korean ally, suggesting that it is favoring the avoidance of war and highly uncertain progress toward denuclearization of the North over its adherence to the alliance. Yet in rejecting the double freeze in favor of the status quo, they merely perpetuate the inconsistencies in U.S. foreign policy. In fact, in proposing the double freeze—aiming to reduce the risks of war with a trade-off between alliance commitments and moves toward denuclearization—the Chinese appear to be more sensitive to the existence of an American trilemma than U.S. policy itself.

To sum up, the United States faces not merely a set of dilemmas in its North Korea policy, but a fundamental trilemma. It is hoping to achieve the complete
denuclearization of North Korea, maintain its forward-deployed position and the U.S.-ROK alliance, and avoid the costs associated with counterproliferation by force. But it can only achieve two simultaneously. It will have to choose. If the arguments above are correct, this will surely prompt the question of which two options the United States should focus on. Of these three options, which two are in the greatest national security interest of the United States and the region as a whole? Given the immense costs of counterproliferation by force, I would argue that this is almost entirely a choice between denuclearization and forward-deployment. And the choice between these two options depends on whether we are referring to the medium to long run or the short run.

In the medium to longer term, it is at least possible that the United States could maintain its demand for denuclearization and avoid the use of military force by a process moving itself off of the Korean Peninsula and renegotiating or entirely dissolving the U.S.-Korea alliance. Given that the topography of the Korean Peninsula is relatively favorable to the defense, and that South Korea is now vastly superior both economically and militarily to its northern neighbor, this is certainly feasible.  

Though to avoid major destabilization in the region, any move away from forward-deployment and toward the dissolution of the U.S-Korea alliance would have to take place gradually, likely over the course of a decade or so. And to be clear, this is not to say that if the United States moved off of the Korean Peninsula that North Korea would be assured to quickly and completely abandon its nuclear weapons program. Having suffered through years of international isolation, economic sanctions, and global moral opprobrium, North Korea would be hard-pressed to easily give up its nuclear capability. The point is only that as the situation currently stands, with the U.S. forward-deployed and allied to the North’s rival to the south, the odds of North Korea voluntarily abandoning its nuclear program in the near term are near zero.

In the short run, the least costly option seems to be for the United States to maintain forward-deployment and avoid a costly forcible regime change, while abandoning its demand for CVID. Given the overwhelming costs associated with the use of military force on the peninsula, and the destabilizing effects that an overly hasty exit from the Korean Peninsula would have, giving up on denuclearization and accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state seems to be the only reasonable short-run course. And it is even possible that doing so would bring some positive benefits. Setting denuclearization as a prerequisite for progress on a number of other important issues of bilateral concern, as the United States long has, has acted as an impediment to even modestly better relations between the United States and North Korea. Without denuclearization...
as a precondition for negotiations, the odds of progress in these other areas—though, of course, not assured—would undoubtedly be improved. While this is likely to be resisted by U.S. policymakers—deemed as “unacceptable” or “politically impossible”—the fundamental inconsistencies among current U.S. policy priorities require that some hard decisions be made. The United States’ North Korean nuclear trilemma means that it simply cannot have it all.

Notes


24. While the North did freeze its plutonium program between 1994 and 2002, this was when it is believed to have begun its highly enriched uranium program. And its missile program has continued unabated throughout its history.


34. For this argument from a different perspective, see: Andrei Lankov, “Why the United States Will Have to Accept a Nuclear North Korea,” Korean Journal of Defense Analysis Vol. 21, no. 3 (2009), pp. 251-264.