

## Why North Korea will Likely Never Denuclearize

Christopher Gettel

In 2006, North Korea detonated its first nuclear device. This nuclear weapons program was the product of decades of research, illegal proliferation, and sanctions evasion. North Korea would go on to detonate six more nuclear weapons, with the latest being in 2017. An intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) was developed to deliver this warhead. Capable of ranges up to 8,000 miles, the Hwasong-15 is North Korea's best chance at a delivery system. The world was quick to condemn these actions after each new test, heavily sanctioning North Korea's economy and applying political pressure on Kim Jong Un. However, all attempts at denuclearization have so far failed. This is because denuclearizing will have negative effects on Kim's grip on power, a byproduct the dictator will never allow. Kim Jong Un's grip on power is maintained by the belief of his constituents that only he is capable of defending them from invasion with the threat of nuclear war and that denuclearization would be viewed as capitulating to a hostile foreign power. Denuclearizing would also leave North Korea's decrepit conventional military vulnerable to attack. The situations of Muammar Ghaddafi and Saddam Hussein are examples of what Kim views of nations hostile to the West abandoning their unconventional deterrent. Therefore, North Korea is unlikely to denuclearize because doing so would present existential domestic and international threats to the Kim regime's grip on power.

Seeing the rapid expansion of South Korea in the 1980's, particularly in the aspects of diplomacy, military power, and economics, North Korea knew that its socialist system would soon lag behind. Therefore, the isolated nation began to develop an unconventional deterrent to protect itself from all threats, internal and external, real and imagined. North Korea has attempted to seek outside help in the field of nuclear weapons since the 1950's, first from the

Soviet Union, and then from China, but was only provided with a peaceful energy reactor and expertise on how to run it. However, after a famine in the early 1990's, North Korea realized it needed a firmer grip on its power in order to dissuade internal dissent and deter outside pressure. North Korea left all prior nonproliferation agreements with various international bodies and detonated its first nuclear device in 2006. Although the yield was small, North Korea joined a small group of nations with nuclear arms. Indigenous delivery systems came next with North Korea eventually designing and producing the Hwasong-15 ICBM, a road mobile launcher capable of launching strikes on the US mainland. Increased hostile rhetoric came next, and with the passing of Kim Jong-Il in 2011, his son took power. Kim Jong Un ushered in a new era of North Korean ambitions. Shifting slightly toward diplomacy and policy, Kim sought to use nuclear weapons as a bargaining chip while assuring his citizens that he alone could protect them from encroaching capitalist invaders. His stance on internal and external power projections are vital to understanding why North Korea is unlikely to ever abandon its nuclear weapons program, even if sanctions and diplomatic pressure are crippling his nation.

If the North Korean leadership and people do not believe that invasion is likely, then they will begin to question whether or not a nuclear weapons program is a better use of money than economic investment and food production. When this realization comes to fruition, Kim may lose the grip on power he inherited from his father in 2011. This would represent an intolerable position for Kim Jong Un. Therefore, certain domestic criteria must be maintained. The Korean people and military must devoutly believe that he, and only he, can deter an invasion by providing a strong nuclear deterrent. This can only be done with regular testing of missiles, the occasional nuclear detonation, and a heavy dose of propaganda to repeatedly reinforce all actions. Although no nation is likely to invade North Korea, the deconstruction of Kim's prized

nuclear weapons will be viewed by his people as capitulation to a sworn enemy who wishes to destroy their livelihoods. This shown weakness will erode his carefully constructed support and possibly lead to his removal from power. Regime survival is at the heart of Kim's domestic agenda, and the main driver of all internal and international policies. In order to maintain his leadership role, the North Korean people must be convinced that a powerful nuclear deterrent is the only thing preventing invasion, and that only Kim can successfully provide the policy to make sure this happens.

While Kim has domestic politics to satisfy, his nuclear program also aims to convince foreign adversaries of his capabilities in order to maintain his grip on power. Due to successful propaganda Kim is more likely to be removed from power by foreign forces than domestic enemies. His attacks during the past years have heightened tensions between North Korea and South Korea, Japan, and America. In 2010, a North Korean submarine sank a South Korean naval vessel, killing 46. During the same year, both sides exchanged artillery fire, leading to the deaths of four South Koreans. A North Korean landmine planted on South Korean soil wounded two South Korean soldiers in 2015. These attacks have all been attributed to Kim Jong Un demonstrating a hard line approach to military action. ICBMs have been flown over Japan with no warning, leading to widespread panic at the notion of a North Korean surprise attack with nuclear weapons. Kim's rhetoric has increased in correlation to each successful missile or nuclear test, with a speech in 2022 in which Kim claimed that "(o)ur armed forces are completely prepared to respond to any crisis, and our country's nuclear war deterrent is also ready to mobilize its absolute power dutifully, exactly and swiftly in accordance with its mission,"(Indian Express, 2022). This signals a strong international messaging campaign that demonstrates North Korea's commitment to military action should tensions escalate. While this

threat was reinforced with conventional action, nuclear capable ICBMs are tested every few months. This is because North Korea's conventional military lacks the means to deter regime change and Kim Jong Un uses the situations in Iraq and Libya as examples of leaders who have been hostile to the West, abandoned weapons of mass destruction, and still were removed from power.

Kim Jong Un is very well aware of what may happen to him if his nation is invaded. In recent years, both Saddam Hussein of Iraq and Muammar Ghaddafi of Libya were removed from power by a western led coalition. Both leaders were captured and executed after having their inferior conventional militaries overwhelmed by advanced western forces in a matter of days. Iraq and Libya both sought weapons of mass destruction at one point, but were both dissuaded from acquiring them under heavy diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions. However, this did not save them in the long run, as future wars saw them both meet their demise. The then Deputy Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, told the New York Times that he “heard directly from the Chinese that the Libyan model did not inspire confidence in Pyongyang.” (New York Times, 2018). This reinforces the belief likely held by Kim that even if he does denuclearize, he is still not guaranteed security. In “2011, North Korea’s official news agency carried comments by a Foreign Ministry official calling the earlier nuclear bargain with Libya “an invasion tactic to disarm the country,” in effect a bait-and-switch. “The Libyan crisis is teaching the international community a grave lesson,” the ministry official said.” (New York Times, 2018). Further negotiations with Iran over its burgeoning nuclear program resulted in a short term agreement under then President Obama that allowed inspections in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. This agreement was withdrawn from by America after then President Trump assumed office. Kim Jong Un knows that nuclear weapons are the only implement that can

almost guarantee his grip on power, regardless of the intentions of outside powers. He also knows that Ghaddafi and Saddam gave up their weapons of mass destruction programs and were violently removed, primarily by external forces. Kim likely believes that the West cannot be trusted to keep agreements, as in the case of then President Trump's withdrawal from an Iranian denuclearization treaty carefully negotiated under then President Obama in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. This is yet another situation in which Kim is influenced by external factors over the role that nuclear weapons play in ensuring the survival of the Kim dynasty.

A nuclear armed North Korea has presented a unique and difficult challenge for the international community. North Korea has fought a war of aggression during the 1950s, and has kept up its hostile rhetoric and aggressive actions since. Small scale military attacks against South Korean and American interests have taken place dozens of times, leading to casualties and damage, further driving the nations away from peaceful reconciliation and towards conflict. The nuclear weapons program developed by the Kim dynasty has advanced despite the best efforts of the international community. Sanctions and diplomatic efforts have not halted the progress made toward ICBMs and nuclear weapons. Kim is unlikely to give up his nuclear program due to domestic agendas required to satisfy those who provide him with power, his constituents and top military officials. To do this, he must continue to maintain the façade that only he can prevent war with nuclear arms, and that denuclearizing would be capitulating to a foreign power, delegitimizing his role as supreme leader, and threatening his regime. Foreign influences also embolden his weapons of mass destruction program. His conventional military would be decisively defeated in combat, leading to his death or imprisonment. Kim knows what has happened to other dictators who act in defiance of international norms and laws, and does not want to end up dead, like Ghaddafi and Saddam. These two gave up their weapons of mass

destruction policy, but were still invaded, overthrown, captured, and killed. This sets a dangerous precedence for rogue nations who operate outside established norms and international law, that acquiring nuclear weapons ensures the survival of their regime and state. North Korea's nuclear weapons program has confounded security experts around the world and will likely keep doing so, as there is no indication that Kim Jong Un will ever denuclearize in the future.

## References

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