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Waiting is not an option: The North Korean threat increases as the country advances its nuclear and missile programmes

The UN Security Council is holding a meeting about North Korea on April 28th. The US fears that if nothing is done, North Korea will sooner or later master the miniaturization of nuclear material applicable to nuclear warheads, which could be launched against it. This is a risk that the US is unable to take.

The situation on the Korean peninsula is undeniably tense and the great powers are divided on how to tackle North Korea's nuclear programme and missile testing. Kim Jong-un's regime has studied the Libya and Iraq cases and has come to the conclusion that nuclear weapons are the only way to protect the country against US attack. The US does not want to recognize North Korea as a nuclear state, which leaves little to negotiate.

President Donald Trump's volatile approach has been criticized for bringing Asia to the brink of a nuclear war. However, there was little strategy involved in the Obama administration's strategic patience. Waiting will not make North Korea's aggressive behaviour disappear, and is more likely to aggravate the problems. It will be even harder to negotiate with North Korea if it manages to master the miniaturization of nuclear material. As a result, the US has now stated that the policy of strategic patience with North Korea is over.

It is worthwhile looking into North Korea's nuclear and missile programmes, both of which are advancing. Its nuclear programme is quite self-sufficient and there are large uranium reserves in the Korean soil. During the past ten years, North Korea has tested five nuclear devices

and learned from each test. It has not yet managed to test a hydrogen bomb, but will reach that stage sooner or later. The same boosting techniques needed for producing hydrogen bombs are relevant in the miniaturization of nuclear material, which can then be applied to missiles. Some nuclear scholars deem it possible that North Korea has already managed to boost fission bombs and is thus moving towards mastering miniaturization.

In addition to developing its nuclear programme, North Korea has increased ballistic missile testing. To date, it has successfully tested a submarine-launched ballistic missile (SLBM) and demonstrated the capacity to launch multiple mid-range missiles simultaneously. Kim Jong-un stated in his 2017 new year's speech that the country would be able to launch intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) soon. The US's greatest fear is a scenario in which North Korea could launch nuclear ICBMs from submarines, making it perilously difficult to prevent potential attacks.

The US has reiterated that China holds the key to resolving the crisis because the latter accounts for roughly 90 per cent of North Korea's trade. For China, maintaining stability and avoiding the collapse of the North Korean regime

are more important policy priorities than denuclearization – leaving it less leeway to pressure North Korea than perceived by the US. Still, North Korea is undermining China's regional security as its recent actions have pushed South Korea to deepen security cooperation with the US. The US started building a Terminal High Altitude Area Defence (THAAD) missile defence system in South Korea ahead of schedule this spring, which China opposes.

Although there has been no major change in China's North Korea policy since North Korea's second nuclear test in 2009, China's rhetoric on North Korea has hardened this spring. So far, its behaviour has been contradictory.

On the one hand, in February China announced a coal ban until the end of 2017 on North Korean coal, based on the UN sanctions. Coal trade accounts for around 35–40 per cent of North Korea's foreign trade. On the other hand, North Korea's Vice Foreign Minister, Ri Kil Song, visited Beijing in March, indicating that China and North Korea may already be trying to ease the tensions. Moreover, according to China's customs statistics, its trade with North Korea increased at the beginning of 2017 on items other than coal. If it so desired, China could shut down oil pipelines, which would have

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serious consequences for North Korea. It wielded this same tool briefly in 2003. However, thanks to China's overall aim for stability, such shutdowns cannot last for very long and hence do not have a long-term impact.

The international community has tried to no avail to pressure North Korea to denuclearize since its first nuclear test in 2006. UN sanctions issued in March 2013 attempted to shut North Korea out of the international financial system. Further sanctions were issued in 2016 when North Korea conducted two new nuclear tests. Yet the country shows no signs of moving towards denuclearization.

An obvious reason for the ineffectiveness of the sanctions is that their implementation remains insufficient and highly inconsistent, as stated by a UN panel of experts in February 2017. North Korea has ways to circumvent sanctions through identity frauds and large overseas networks. A key issue helping the North Koreans is the rampant corruption in China, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. When non-North Korean nationals participate in North Korea's illicit activities, they become much harder to track and prevent. North Korea's arms and drugs trade is linked to international

criminal networks, and the country also manages to collect money by sending its workers abroad to earn. Such 'guest workers' are a common occurrence in Russia, but some have worked in Eastern Europe as well.

For a viable long-term solution, we cannot expect the North Korea problem to be resolved overnight. Some international experts have proposed North Korea's inclusion under China's nuclear umbrella in an effort to persuade North Korea to decelerate its nuclear programme. This would be hard for the US to accept, and it would be equally hard to convince the North Koreans to trust China. However, this option has vital elements that could prevent war on the peninsula: stability and control over North Korea's nuclear activities.