

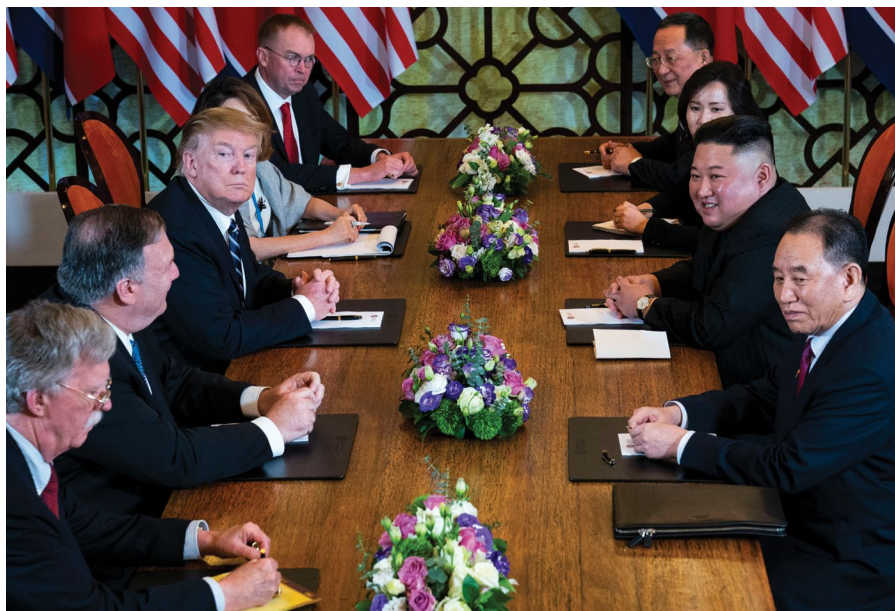
# SPECIAL REPORT

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## How to Engage the Enemy: The Case for National Security Diplomacy with North Korea

By Van Jackson



US President Donald Trump sits across from Kim Jong Un, the leader of North Korea, during a February 2019 meeting in Vietnam. (Photo by Doug Mills/New York Times)

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### Summary

- Isolating North Korea from the United States and the international community is self-defeating. The sparseness of US ties to North Korean officials magnifies risks related to crisis management, nuclear stability, and diplomatic negotiations.
- US policy inadvertently increases the difficulty for US officials to manage a host of security problems in

Northeast Asia because it constricts US interactions with North Koreans.

- The United States has a substantial interest in using engagement with North Korean national security officials as a low-cost hedging option in US statecraft.
- Institutionalizing defense and intelligence diplomacy with North Korean counterparts puts US offi-

cials in a relatively stronger position than the status quo to reduce geopolitical risks and influence events.

- Thickening elite ties with a historical adversary puts the United States in a marginally better position to preserve nuclear stability, avoid war, and capitalize on opportunities for positive change as they arise.



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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines the benefits and risks to the United States of establishing regular diplomatic engagements with North Korea's national security elites in an effort to improve the prospects of peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The report was commissioned by the North Korea program at the United States Institute of Peace.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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US President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un leave a meeting at the Freedom House, next to the Demilitarized Zone in South Korea, on June 30, 2019. (Photo by Erin Schaff/New York Times)

## Introduction

For decades, US policy has worked to isolate North Korea from the international community as well as from the United States itself. North Korea threatens US allies in the region and, increasingly, US territory directly. Its pursuit of nuclear weapons, illicit trafficking, and missile testing has repeatedly flouted international laws and norms. Domestically, it commits human rights abuses at scale. For all these reasons, the United States has used international diplomacy to politically ostracize North Korea and impose a stringent regime of economic sanctions. These coercive measures have been designed in large part to convince the Kim family regime to denuclearize, cease threatening neighboring states, and conform to the standards of the international community.

This confrontational approach has failed. Isolation tactics have unintentionally created substantial disadvantages in dealing with North Korea as a nascent nuclear state and rival. The problem facing US policymakers is not simply that sparse ties deprive the United States of any ability to shape North Korean policy choices, though they do. It is that every so often, the United States ends up in a crisis with North Korea where one miscalculation could trigger a disastrous conflict spiral. In the event that the Kim Jong Un regime is displaced from power or otherwise loses control of the country, the United States has no channels of influence or local insight because it has no cross-national relationships with North Korean political or military elites, and sparse, unreliable channels of communication. Within the North Korean national security community that supports and advises Kim, very few stakeholders support negotiation and trust building with the

United States. Most important, the United States knows frighteningly little about North Korea's nuclear doctrine, its command and control, or how it keeps its nuclear weapons secure.

To help US policymakers better manage the myriad risks they face on the Korean Peninsula, this report assesses whether and how to not only pursue but also institutionalize “national security diplomacy” with North Korea—a broad concept of engagement that includes and extends beyond military-to-military (mil-mil) diplomacy. It responds to the National Defense Authorization Act of 2020, which called for the secretary of defense, chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, and director of national intelligence to jointly conduct “an assessment of the extent to which . . . military-to-military dialogue” with North Korea has benefits and risks for US national security.<sup>1</sup> It argues that, if structured appropriately, persistent engagement with North Korean national security elites is a policy wager with a large potential upside and very little cost and risk.

National security diplomacy on its own can change little in the US–North Korea rivalry. The initiative proposed here should not be burdened with the expectation of resolving the United States' security concerns on the Korean Peninsula, but it can substantially improve the US ability to keep the Peninsula stable and to capitalize on opportunities for positive change that may arise. It is a valuable hedging option in US statecraft. Also, in conjunction with a more realistic and comprehensive North Korea strategy, national security engagement may also serve as a useful down payment on a forward-looking strategic relationship.

## A Primer on Engaging North Korea's Military

The Korean People's Army (KPA) has always been central in North Korean life. The country's founder, Kim Il Sung, created political legitimacy out of his reputation as an anti-Japanese guerilla in World War II and used the KPA as a crucial asset in the process of consolidating control of the country. Kim believed the KPA “the most important organization for [Korea's] unification and independence.”<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, the propaganda that helped Kim eventually establish a cult of personality over the decades also venerated the military.

### MILITARY POLITICS

When Kim Il Sung died in 1994 and was succeeded by his son Kim Jong Il, the military became even more influential in relative terms. Kim Jong Il did not serve in the military and did not have a legacy as a guerilla. Lacking military credentials and having inherited deteriorating economic conditions, he pursued a highly institutionalized balancing approach to ruling the country that further elevated the military's status. In 1998, Kim declared a *Songun* (military-first) policy that made military centrality the guiding ethos of the country.<sup>3</sup> The KPA received priority rations, priority in the national budget (military expenditures account for as much as a quarter of North Korea's GDP), and priority in foreign policy relative to other bureaucratic actors.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the KPA continues to be the country's largest employer, extracting labor from some one million North Korean citizens and counting up to 30 percent of the population as KPA reservists.<sup>5</sup>



When Kim Jong Il's son Kim Jong Un came to power in 2011, he started elevating the Korean Worker's Party and civilian loyalists while seemingly subordinating the military—in a sense informally repudiating the military-first tradition.<sup>6</sup> But it has been a change of degree, not kind. Even as Kim Jong Un purged many senior military officers and articulated a new *byungjin* line as the country's political direction, he did so while continuing to reify military-first policy as a “first, second, and third priority” for North Korea.<sup>7</sup> As recently as May 2020, Kim chaired a meeting of the Central Military Commission directing the KPA's “further increasing the nuclear war deterrence of the country” and “the capabilities for militarily deterring the threatening foreign forces by rapidly increasing the self-reliant defence capabilities and organizing new units.”<sup>8</sup> Kim's rule has been more personalistic and centralized than his father's, and the Korean Workers' Party (KWP) has certainly strengthened its position relative to the KPA, but the military permeates the regime's political architecture all the same and continues to retain symbolic and cultural importance even beyond its geopolitical value for repelling “threatening foreign forces.”<sup>9</sup>

Institutionally, the most significant blow to the military's power within North Korea may have been Kim's replacement of the National Defense Commission (NDC) in 2016 with the State Affairs Commission (SAC). The NDC had broad policymaking authority, was occupied mostly by KPA generals, and focused primarily on national security. The SAC that replaced it has a wider mandate than national security, supervises the KPA and the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, and has almost exclusively civilian members.<sup>10</sup>

## US-NORTH KOREA NATIONAL SECURITY DIPLOMACY

In keeping with its character as a militarist society and regime, North Korea's most important diplomatic engagements with the United States have often involved the regime's national security elites, a broad constituency that centers on the KPA. North Korea's Foreign Ministry is the institutional counterpart to the US Department of State, and therefore its diplomats have generally had responsibility for serving as interlocutors in nuclear diplomacy with the United States. It is unclear, however, that they have ever been given the authority to tread on the equities of the military. Engagement with North Korea's Foreign Ministry is presumptively important, but military elites have played an underestimated role in Pyongyang's historical engagements with the United States.

The primary formal interaction the US and North Korean militaries have with one another occurs through the UN Command Military Armistice Commission (UNCMAC). The scope of their duties involves not high policy but functional communication as part of monitoring and implementing the 1953 Armistice Agreement. Yet this channel was the primary method of US communication with North Korea when the KPA seized the USS *Pueblo* intelligence vessel in 1968. US negotiations to have the American military crew returned, which lasted more than a year, took place entirely through mil-mil engagements in which mid-ranking soldiers from each side recited scripted talking points from their political leadership. Nevertheless, this channel to the KPA is what made eventual resolution of the crisis possible. When North Korea shot down the US EC-121 reconnaissance aircraft in April 1969, killing all thirty-one crewmembers on board, it was again through soldiers assigned to UNCMAC that the United States communicated grievances and warnings to North Korea. The interlocutor through that short-lived crisis was the KPA, not the Foreign Ministry. Again in 1976,

North Korea functions as a one-man dictatorship. Yet that does not mean that only one person in the regime has authority—far from it. Dictators still rely on institutions and organizations to generate advice and carry out orders.

when KPA soldiers gruesomely murdered two US soldiers assigned to the demilitarized zone, sparking another crisis, all demands and even the eventual semi-apology from Kim Il Sung were relayed through the KPA. These crises were some of the most consequential interactions between the United States and North Korea during the Cold War. They certainly involved the highest stakes. And they all involved adjudication through mil-mil communication.

These incidents are relics of the Cold War and therefore possibly irrelevant today. They were also military in nature and thus naturally resolved through the KPA. For North Korea, however, security-relevant concerns are inescapably military. To assume that the Foreign Ministry would handle matters of grave national security concern projects a mirror image onto Pyongyang of how the United States treats the State Department. More important, the pattern of de facto military primacy in high-stakes interactions with the United States has persisted in the post–Cold War era—even under Kim Jong Un.

As the United States and North Korea pursued an uneasy rapprochement in the latter half of the 1990s, follow-on meetings and bilateral negotiations subsequent to the 1994 Agreed Framework, which froze North Korea’s nuclear power program, culminated in talk of a leader summit involving President Bill Clinton and Kim Jong Il. Although the two leaders never ended up meeting during Clinton’s presidency, the diplomatic momentum toward even considering it peaked when Clinton invited a North Korean senior delegation to the White House. That delegation, which arrived in October 2000 during the twilight of the Clinton presidency, was led not by the Foreign Ministry but instead by Jo Myong Rok, a KPA vice marshal (senior to a general) who was also first vice chairman of the then-powerful National Defense Commission. Jo wore a suit when he met Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, but changed into his dress military uniform for White House meetings with National Security Advisor Sandy Berger and President Clinton.<sup>11</sup>

Even more recently, Pyongyang’s equivalent of the national security establishment played a crucial role in engagements with the United States. As early as 2009, the CIA had reportedly set up a covert communication channel with an intelligence arm of the KPA known as the Reconnaissance General Bureau (RGB).<sup>12</sup> In the midst of the 2017 nuclear crisis with North Korea, when Pyongyang conducted a series of provocative nuclear and ballistic missile tests, then CIA Director Mike Pompeo reactivated this dormant channel of communication, deploying a CIA officer to hold a one-off meeting in August that year—but to no effect.<sup>13</sup> Shortly after President Donald Trump announced that he would meet with Kim Jong Un in March 2018, Pompeo used this channel to the RGB to hastily arrange preparations for the Trump-Kim summit in Singapore, and a later one in Hanoi.<sup>14</sup>

When Pompeo flew to Pyongyang to plan for these events and meet with Kim Jong Un, his counterpart was Kim Yong Chol, vice chairman of the Central Committee of the KWP who had previously led the RGB. As head of the RGB, Kim was responsible for the two North Korean military attacks against South Korea in 2010. In that role, he also met former CIA Deputy Director Mike Morell in 2012, when Morell was seeking North Korean restraint to avoid sabotaging nuclear negotiations, as well as Director of National Intelligence James Clapper in 2014, when Clapper was dispatched to secure the release of American detainees.<sup>15</sup> The current foreign minister, Ri Son Gwon, who was appointed

sometime around January 2020, was a former KPA officer and a close subordinate of Kim Yong Chol when he headed the RGB.<sup>16</sup> In last-minute preparations for the first Trump-Kim summit, North Korea also relied on Kim Chang Son to coordinate with White House Deputy Chief of Staff Joe Hagin.<sup>17</sup> Kim Chang Son spent most of his career in the Ministry of People's Armed Forces, which is the equivalent of the US Department of Defense. He was also chief secretary of the State Affairs Commission that replaced the powerful National Defense Commission, and part of the NDC before it became the SAC. When Kim Jong Un actually met Trump in Singapore in June 2018, his six-person delegation included not only Kim Yong Chol but also No Kwang Chol, minister of the People's Armed Forces.

These summits were the most important diplomatic gambits North Korea had made vis-à-vis the United States in years. North Korea drew on national security elites for both coordinating them and for staffing them alongside Kim Jong Un. As it had done in 2014, 2000, and during the recurring crises of the Cold War, North Korea leaned on its national security community to engage the United States.

What is more, the most tangible displays of cooperation between North and South Korea since the 2017 nuclear crisis involved the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018, which included a Comprehensive Military Agreement specifying the demilitarization of the Joint Security Area at Panmunjom and other military confidence-building measures.<sup>18</sup> As part of that agreement, North Korea—specifically the KPA—participated in a trilateral body that included not just inter-Korean forces but also UN Command representatives, temporarily bringing US soldiers in more frequent working-level contact with the KPA than they had been in decades.<sup>19</sup> This military cooperation to reduce mutual friction and hostility is the most successful of the measures agreed to in the Pyongyang Joint Declaration, and it is the part of the agreement that brought the KPA and US military into direct contact. When it became clear that North Korea's summit diplomacy with the United States would not lead to any kind of nuclear agreement, further KPA cooperation implementing the Pyongyang Joint Declaration effectively ceased.<sup>20</sup>

None of this is to suggest the KPA somehow has greater influence than Kim Jong Un. It does not, formally or informally. North Korea functions as a one-man dictatorship. Yet that does not mean that only one person in the regime has authority—far from it. Dictators still rely on institutions and organizations to generate advice and carry out orders. The military is a large and diffuse interest group, one with possibly the highest stakes in any outcome involving US negotiations with North Korea on any subject of national security concern. The notion that the KPA or North Korea's larger national security enterprise cannot or would not engage in diplomacy with the United States ignores the historical record.

## The Risks of Isolation

The isolation of North Korea from the United States is at least partly a function of US–North Korea policy, which relies heavily on economic sanctions as a tool of coercion, law enforcement, and signaling to the Kim regime.<sup>21</sup> Because the US and North Korean governments have no official relationship, and because US sanctions prevent economic relationships from forming with North Korea, individual Americans and North Koreans have substantially limited interactions, especially at an inter-elite level.<sup>22</sup>

Washington's primary and longest-running method of political communication with Pyongyang is the so-called New York channel—the US unofficial liaison with the North Korean ambassador's office at the United Nations in New York.<sup>23</sup> This channel, however, is extremely narrow and bureaucratic, managed entirely by the US Special Envoy for North Korea Policy (or a designate) and by the North Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs.<sup>24</sup> Through unofficial track 2 meetings, former US officials and relevant experts also sometimes liaise with North Korea at an elite level, but these encounters are sporadic and constrained by Treasury Department designations that limit direct interaction. Furthermore, track 2 diplomatic engagement with North Korea invariably involves the same small set of interlocutors from North Korea's Foreign Ministry who engage in hard-line nuclear negotiations with the United States at a government-to-government level. As far as is publicly known, the United States has little access to the wider community of North Korean national security elites.<sup>25</sup>

This isolation increases not just the risk that geopolitical crises will occur but the risk that any individual crisis will escalate to war.

## GEOPOLITICAL RISKS

North Korea's relative isolation from the United States deeply impedes Washington's ability to respond to three types of related geopolitical risks—a conflict spiral, regime collapse, and nuclear use.

The risk of conflict escalation in the middle of a crisis is a recurring problem that was most acute during the nuclear confrontation in 2017. Logically, war tends to be preceded by crisis, and crisis by rivalry. As long as the US rivalry with North Korea remains, crisis will continue to be an intermittent feature of their bilateral relations. This is a problem because in the constrained decision-making environment of a crisis, miscalculation and misperception become pathways to war even if both sides' leaders prefer to avoid conflict.<sup>26</sup>

The second risk vis-à-vis North Korea is a collapse of the Kim regime that opens up either a collapse of governance or a contest for power that risks destabilizing the region. In the absence of internal order, mass refugees may flow across North Korea's northern border into China, and the command and control of North Korean nuclear weapons would become even more opaque than it is now.<sup>27</sup> Under such conditions, the United States could have difficulty discerning real-time conditions on the ground, including identifying the legitimate (or most legitimate) power center with which to interact.

The third risk involves nuclear instability, which intersects with the other two. North Korea has made nuclear weapons central to its security, and its elites express a strategic culture prone to calculated risk-taking.<sup>28</sup> North Korean nuclear weapons use is unlikely, but in a crisis the probability increases if US actions drive North Korean decision makers into a position where nuclear first-use becomes the best strategic option for navigating a desperate circumstance. This raises the question of what US actions under what conditions increase pressures on North Korea to resort to nuclear first-use. In the event of regime collapse, the same nuclear instability risk could arise but compounded by a larger uncertainty—what happens to North Korean nuclear command, control, and communications (NC3) in a system where “the nuclear button” has previously been centralized in a leadership that no longer exists? The space for undesirable, high-cost possibilities opens wider—nuclear accidents, functionaries involved in the launch process receiving conflicting or ambiguous orders, and horizontal nuclear proliferation as the government in North Korea loses positive oversight of its nuclear arsenal.





Visitors at the Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum in Pyongyang on July 27, 2020, the 67th anniversary of the signing of the Korean Armistice Agreement that brought about a cease-fire between North and South Korea and their allies in 1953. (Photo by Jon Chol Jin/AP)

## RISK MAGNIFICATION

Any strategy the United States pursues in relation to North Korea should seek to manage or reduce these major risks. But the social distance and sparse ties between the two governments actually exacerbate them by positioning the United States unfavorably in relation to all three.

Avoiding inadvertent war amid an enduring rivalry requires having ways of reducing misperceptions and managing crises. Without engagement, those in Pyongyang who advise and implement decisions of war and peace for Kim Jong Un will continue to assume the worst of US intentions and have no credible source of competing information.<sup>29</sup> Consequently, sequestering North Korean national security elites from the United States hinders future attempts at both crisis prevention and de-escalation. Preventing crises means preventing the surprisingly brazen North Korean actions and threats that have in the past triggered them. But under conditions of mutual hostility, dissuasion of crisis-triggering behavior depends not primarily on US coercion but instead on giving North Korean officials who benefit professionally from friction with the United States a stake in restraint or less provocative policy recommendations. Yet such a strategy of “empowering the moderates” is impossible unless at least thin connections exist between US officials and their counterparts in Pyongyang.<sup>30</sup> This reasoning applies to de-escalation “off-ramps” in the midst of crises as well.

Without engagement, those in Pyongyang who advise and implement decisions of war and peace for Kim Jong Un will continue to assume the worst of US intentions and have no credible source of competing information.

Similarly, in the event of regime collapse, uncertainty risks either paralyzing US decision makers or forcing them to pursue courses of action premised on unreliable information and with few ways of shaping events on the ground in North Korea. Under status quo conditions, the United States does not know much about North Korea, but existing theories, frameworks, and the track record of sta-

ble leadership makes it possible to reasonably deduce working hypotheses about its strategy and intentions. In a collapse scenario, the United States would face deep analytical opacity, losing the ability to apply existing ways of thinking about North Korea with any reliability. Real-time intelligence about who is asserting control over the regime, how contested that assertion is, and what the disposition of its NC3 will be as internal politics change will be at a premium, yet the United States is positioning itself to be entirely without it. Moreover, the US Army has trained and equipped a weapons of mass destruction elimination team that, in theory, could enter North Korea to render safe nuclear facilities—although doing so without the support of at least some North Korean officials on the ground would be high risk at best and catastrophic at worst.

The United States also knows very little about North Korean nuclear strategy and doctrine. Most insights are inferred through a combination of deductive reasoning and fragmented observations of North Korean words and deeds that often have shrouded meaning.<sup>31</sup> This makes nuclear risks harder to manage because if the United States does not understand how North Korea thinks about the role of nuclear weapons in its security at both an operational and strategic level, its actions could unknowingly risk first-use instability—that is, increase the pressures facing North Korean leadership to exploit the coercive potential of nuclear weapons.<sup>32</sup> As of this writing, experts still debate whether North Korea has a strategy of deliberately using nuclear weapons early in a conflict (asymmetric escalation) or strictly in response to being attacked with nuclear weapons (assured retaliation).<sup>33</sup> This is high-consequence information for US strategy and policy planning purposes, but because the United States has no contact with the KPA or the party cadre who give the military political guidance, it does not know the extent to which North Korean elites have thought through or developed a nuclear posture beyond symbolic and existential nuclear deterrence.

## Engagement as a Wager-Risk Proposition

Persistent national security engagement with North Korea has multiple potential payoffs. None are assured, and none are intended to be a direct solution to any problem on its own. Instead, the payoffs, individually and collectively, take the form of a more favorable opportunity structure for the United States, putting US officials in a relatively stronger position than the status quo to reduce geopolitical risks and influence events. As former Director of National Intelligence Dennis Blair characterized the covert channel with North Korea that started in 2009 but gradually

languished, the broad hope was to ensure that “we are not misinterpreting what is happening and there is the possibility to grab small openings” for positive change.<sup>34</sup>

**Crisis management.** The most intuitive potential payoff of maintaining mil-mil relationships, both formal and informal, is their potential role in facilitating better crisis management. Years of US mil-mil engagements with China failed to yield observable transformative changes in the overall Sino-US relationship, although they succeeded in bolstering mutual vulnerability to each other’s nuclear arsenals and in working out operational-level arrangements to avoid military clashes in the air and at sea.<sup>35</sup> Strategically oriented dialogue can mitigate the potential for bad policy wagers in the midst of a crisis. Over time, routinized relationships between high-level military counterparts become an asset, ensuring that the adversary at least hears your perspective and intent on a time-scale and hierarchical level relevant to preventing decisions that risk conflict escalation. Extending that dialogue to the working level also allows both militaries to develop technical and communication procedures that minimize misperceptions and avoid military accidents. In the event of regime collapse or instability inside North Korea, KPA officials with unclear or conflicting guidance from Pyongyang will at least have the option of seeking input from US counterparts, giving the United States the possibility of encouraging stabilizing decisions in the fog of crisis.

**Strategic learning.** A second payoff from sustained national security engagement is two-way strategic learning to reduce the risk of nuclear war. US officials need to understand how North Korean elites think about nuclear weapons in peacetime and in crisis, and North Korean elites need to understand how US officials think about threats and uses of force as well. US deterrence policies should logically hinge on expectations of how adversaries are likely to react to different types of US coercive signals, which in turn depends on their respective strategic cultures and nuclear postures. The tendency to treat North Korea’s strategic mindset as immaterial to US threat making during the 2017 nuclear crisis was one of the factors that made it so dangerous.<sup>36</sup>

Over more than a decade of dialogues with Chinese strategists, nuclear analysts, and high-level political elite, the United States established a now-suspended community of policy influencers to clarify intentions, explore thinking behind various types of military signaling, and discern risk tolerances on both sides. These cumulative engagements generated much better insight for US officials about China’s nuclear posture and strategy than in the early years of the Chinese nuclear weapons program, which in turn reduced the risk of strategic instability.<sup>37</sup> Constructing a transnational community of practice between US and North Korean national security elites makes it possible to alleviate the extreme opacity of North Korean NC3 and nuclear doctrine. It would also incentivize North Korea to invest in the intellectual forethought and rational planning necessary to manage nuclear stability on the Korean Peninsula over time.<sup>38</sup> If North Korea is to remain a de facto nuclear weapons state, national security diplomacy with its relevant cadre could help the United States make it a responsible one.

**Buy-in for diplomacy.** The third payoff is akin to the concept of preventive defense, proactively dampening incentives for North Korea to engage in dangerous foreign policy gambits like “provocations” or asymmetric warfare.<sup>39</sup> By building informal relationships with North Korea’s military establishment, the United States has a chance of “empowering the moderates” by proxy in foreign policy proposals within North Korea. The idea is less to presume dovish voices exist in the KPA than to incentivize the KPA to back diplomatic initiatives. The KPA tends to have





Military officers from the US-led United Nations Command, South Korea, and North Korea (clockwise from left) attend an October 16, 2018 meeting in the Demilitarized Zone to discuss efforts to ban weapons in the border village of Panmunjom. (Photo by South Korea Defense Ministry via AP)

the most hawkish foreign policy preferences within the North Korean bureaucracy.<sup>40</sup> Although military elites are likely to faithfully implement Kim Jong Un's orders, decisions that constrain or reduce the influence of the military are not necessarily what they prefer. If the KPA becomes invested in larger attempts at arms control, rapprochement, or peacebuilding with the United States, it may be more likely to advise restraint and avoid proposals that would sabotage diplomatic initiatives with the United States.

**Military professionalization and liberalization.** Mil-mil engagement—if diffuse and persistent—also holds out the possibility of encouraging professionalization and liberal institutional reforms within the North Korean military over the longer term. This seems far-fetched given the entrenched authoritarian character of the Kim regime and the military's role within it. But a substantial body of scholarship on socialization gives hope that exposure to foreign ideas and practices can lead to their internalization by political elites.<sup>41</sup> Through various forms of mil-mil interaction and exchange, the US military has effected democratic cultural change within the militaries of former autocracies.<sup>42</sup> And if an Arab Spring-like situation ever arose in Pyongyang—however improbable—prior socialization to the role of militaries as guardians of democratic societies might make the difference in terms of whether the KPA becomes an oppressor or defender of

North Korean citizens in the middle of an internal political crisis.<sup>43</sup> The reasoning is that “when people who are repressed by autocratic regimes decide to take matters in their own hands . . . they are more likely to succeed because their own militaries are less likely to help repressive regimes stay in power.”<sup>44</sup> It is not necessarily that the military can or would drive democratic change within North Korea or any country. Instead, it is that the military is a crucial, even most likely, veto player in democratization processes. Shaping troops toward restraint and support for their people in crucial moments can be the determining factor in whether any nascent future reform movement succeeds or fails. In this way, using mil-mil relations as a way of seeding long-term liberalization within military institutions in North Korea simply extends to the national security sector a wager about the virtue of socializing favorable views of democratic practices through engagement—which is largely taken for granted in the foreign policy community.<sup>45</sup>

## POTENTIAL COUNTERARGUMENTS

National security engagement with North Korea incurs little actual geopolitical cost, but several potential counterarguments about why the United States should not engage with North Korean national security actors are important to consider.

**Moral hazard.** One reservation about engaging the KPA may be the perception that it effectively rewards bad behavior. North Korean threats and wanton violations of international law in 2017 bought it meetings with US leaders in 2018, for example.<sup>46</sup> This argument downplays the role of national security diplomacy as a long-term investment in US statecraft in favor of treating relationship building as a concession to North Korea. But framing face-to-face communication with an enemy as a commodity to be given or withheld is problematic for two reasons beyond narcissism. One is that direct diplomacy, even when “costless,” can communicate valuable information to the enemy about your intentions and vice versa.<sup>47</sup> Because the United States has nothing to gain from misrepresenting or having North Korea misunderstand its intentions, there is nothing to lose in the process of engagement itself.

The other reason is that a large body of research suggests that any pathway out of permanent rivalry conditions requires the stronger power to initially make accommodations of the weaker rival.<sup>48</sup> Just because no point is foreseeable in the future in which North Korea and the United States might become trusted intimates does not mean US policy should resign itself to the high-risk fatalism of permanent rivalry. If that kind of pivot is ever to occur, it will need to be preceded by a prolonged process of engagement with cadres beyond North Korea’s professional diplomats.

Any morally grounded argument against engagement also has to reckon with the new history opened by President Trump’s multiple meetings and recurring statements of affection for Kim Jong Un. His engagements with Kim may have been fruitless, in ill taste, or mere reality television in a diversionary foreign policy that prioritized distraction over progress.<sup>49</sup> But what even the most incisive critics of the summits must acknowledge is that they were not costly in and of themselves. To the contrary, they normalized the possibility of high-level meetings with North Korean elites without requiring them to be zero-sum negotiations. Because of the summits, Kim Jong Un has set a precedent at the top for exploratory meetings with US counterparts.

**Deception.** A second reason for concern about national security engagement may be that North Korea would use it to deceive the United States about its intentions or nuclear strategy. After



all, deliberately misrepresenting information about yourself to an enemy is rational, and history has proven that North Korea is not above lying to the United States. It can hardly be expected otherwise given deep mutual mistrust. But in North Korea's case, a history of persistent brinkmanship makes it difficult for it to deceive the United States about intentions without harming its own strategic position. Because North Korea is inferior in terms of conventional and nuclear weapons relative to the United States, its ability to coerce depends on manipulating risk by signaling superior resolve, which it does through brinkmanship—a tactic that communicates a willingness to go to war for one's goals. Lying about its willingness to use force when its default disposition is “anytime, anywhere” does not make sense. In other words, tricking the United States into complacency would undermine what makes North Korea's strategy work—a willingness to go to the brink in a confrontation. Similarly, in the debate about North Korea's nuclear strategy, it has an interest in ensuring that the United States does not have the wrong understanding. If North Korea positions itself for asymmetric escalation—a willingness to use nuclear weapons even if the United States has not—it needs the United States to believe it is willing to do so if it hopes to extract coercive value from such a strategy. If North Korea will use nuclear weapons only when attacked with nuclear weapons, it takes an unnecessary risk if it lets the United States believe it would strike first.<sup>50</sup>

In theory, the “shadow of the future” from persistent engagement further disincentivizes strategic deception. If national security elites in Pyongyang view meetings with the United States as one-time or infrequent events, they would have no reservation about lying as long as doing so was not self-sabotage. But expectations of recurring future meetings with US counterparts discourage lying—at least on the margins—because deception would at that point risk a loss of face (or risk US officials reciprocating with deception in kind). More important, the United States need not trust without verification prematurely. North Korea is hardly the only source of US intelligence about the regime and how it thinks. Analysts have developed substantial inferential insights about North Korea's nuclear and military strategies and how it would behave in a crisis. Any information US officials gain from engagements with North Korea can be compared against a library of rigorous frameworks and theories. The information North Korea communicates to US counterparts will be cross-referenced with both logic and other sources of evidence, tempering the ability to deceive the United States.

**Politicization.** A third worry might be that North Korean leaders—or Kim Jong Un himself—would manipulate national security engagement for zero-sum political gains. Many of the benefits of engagement discussed depend on their routinization or insulation from high politics. China regularly used mil-mil diplomacy with the United States as a signaling device to communicate opprobrium, indirect threats, and changes in level of satisfaction.<sup>51</sup> In this sense, the China case presents mil-mil very much as a tool of the larger Sino-US political relationship regardless of intentions to make it a routine and apolitical institution.

But politicization in US–North Korea relations is actually more asset than risk. Arguably the most significant problem for US policy on the Korean Peninsula is its perpetual precariousness; crises in which war becomes conceivable are a recurring feature of the landscape. As an analyst in the US intelligence community once remarked of North Korea, “Almost every indicator [for imminent war] is lit up. . . . They could stay that way for years or they could attack tomorrow.”<sup>52</sup> That condition places a premium on indicators and warnings of war, as well as on mechanisms that allow North Korea to express displeasure without always invoking threatening rhetoric or risky military movements.

Kim may oppose engagement unless it could ultimately be used to negotiate economic benefits or material reductions in North Korea's exposure to the perceived threat it faces from the United States.

Thus, if Kim Jong Un decided to render national security diplomacy with the United States into a signaling tool, it would have the indirect benefit of being an indicator of relative stability—presumably crisis would not be imminent during sustained periods of national security diplomacy and would be relatively more plausible when routine engagements have been suspended. Used in this way, politicization by North

Korea also creates a more stable baseline for departures from normal diplomacy into coercive bargaining. It gives Kim Jong Un a way of calibrating friction with the United States so that it is more proportional and less gratuitous, effectively giving Kim a way out of perpetual brinkmanship.

It might also be argued that Kim Jong Un would not permit any form of national security diplomacy with the United States unless it directly furthered his regime's goals. North Korea is still subject to a version of US "maximum pressure," sanctions have substantially increased in recent years, and its rivalry with the United States remains in place. For these reasons, Kim may oppose engagement unless it could ultimately be used to negotiate economic benefits or material reductions in North Korea's exposure to the perceived threat it faces from the United States.

Confirming Kim's willingness to pursue national security diplomacy, however, requires an earnest attempt at it. And there is no inherent reason to oppose using national security engagements as a segue to more difficult negotiations—North Korea has many needs and perceived grievances that the United States is in a position to address. Recognizing that negotiations on highly contested issues are unlikely to progress without a significant prior period of confidence building, the United States might propose prioritizing less contentious issues on which positive-sum cooperation is possible: prisoner of war, missing in action, and remains recovery operations; antipersonnel demining operations; enhanced communication about military exercises; and others.

## National Security Diplomacy with North Korea: An Agenda

The following proposal for national security diplomacy with North Korea is structured to reduce risks and to improve the overall security situation on the Korean Peninsula over time. It is not necessarily the only blueprint for engagement that could benefit US and Korean interests—but it is illustrative of how it could be conducted. The blueprint adheres to four principles intended to give national security diplomacy the best chance of avoiding the pitfalls of engagement.

First, engagement should be treated as a process of construction, not as an ad hoc meeting or a zero-sum negotiation. One major problem with the covert channel to North Korea was that it appeared to be motivated by US desperation; dispatching officials only when policymakers find themselves under duress is likely to be counterproductive. Second, engagement must start as a top-down, politically driven process. North Korean counterparts need the imprimatur of meeting only after their superiors have similarly done so. Third, despite the initial importance of political will, engagement must eventually become an ambient feature in the strategic relationship to be effective. Fourth, mil-mil diplomacy should be ensconced in a broader engagement framework involving national security

counterparts. Many US national security functions that fall outside the Department of Defense (DoD) are KPA responsibilities in North Korea, yet North Korea's national security apparatus is not limited to the KPA and involves blurred lines of authority and influence at the most senior levels.

## PHASE I

**Prisoners of war and missing in action (POW/MIA) proposal.** One of the recurring initiatives that demonstrates positive-sum US military and KPA cooperation involves POW/MIA operations in North Korea to recover the remains of lost and unidentified US service members from the Korean War. When the larger political relationship allows, the KPA has generally proven amenable to working with the DoD on such operations. As a first step, the United States might relay a request to reinstate them, using them to explicitly signal an interest in furthering dialogue at a mil-mil level.

**DoD-KPA exchange of letters.** If POW/MIA operations resume without incident, they could be followed up with a personal letter from the secretary of defense to his North Korean counterpart, the minister of the People's Armed Forces. The letter could describe how both sides might benefit from meeting, and propose a defense summit to explore a new type of a strategic relationship. It could propose coordinating logistics primarily through the Military Armistice Commission initially, and to have US and North Korean defense officials at the assistant secretary level hold a "check-in" preparatory meeting on the sidelines of an important, high-visibility regional conference like the Shangri-La Dialogue.

**Preparatory meetings.** Coordinating a defense ministerial meeting would first require lower-rank officials and active-duty military officers to engage each other in order to prepare. The commander of US Forces Korea, who is also the commander of Combined Forces Command and the UN Command, should be the secretary of defense's direct representative responsible for meeting coordination to buoy the legitimacy and relevance to diplomacy of the US military's local representatives on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, the senior US defense official responsible for Asia in the Pentagon should be in charge of the planning process not only to communicate a unity of effort within the US government, but also to signal to the KPA that someone of senior rank who is close to the secretary of defense will be personally involved.

**DoD-MPAF ministerial meeting.** The first official defense summit with the KPA should occur between the secretary of defense and the minister of the People's Armed Forces. It should be a consecration of a shared commitment to further engagement, not a negotiation. Several potential issues of mutual benefit could guide the agenda:

- establishing a ministerial-level hotline, initially for emergency use but with the possibility for use to make courtesy calls or advance notices before military actions that risk being misinterpreted;
- proceeding with planning for a strategic security dialogue that involves intelligence and defense counterparts;
- signing a joint statement of nonhostile intent that affirms support for the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018 and agrees to hold another defense summit meeting in the future; and
- deconflicting all weapons tests and military exercises with summits and other high-level meetings involving the DoD and KPA.

## PHASE II

**A strategic security dialogue.** A minister-level dialogue involving national security leaders from both the United States and North Korea could include the following roughly equivalent counterparts:

- secretary of defense to minister of the People's Armed Forces
- national security advisor to first vice chairman of the State Affairs Commission
- director of the CIA to director of the Reconnaissance General Bureau
- chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to the vice chairman of the Central Military Commission and the chief of the KPA General Staff Department
- undersecretary of defense for Strategy, Forces, and Capabilities to commander of the Strategic Rocket Force/Missile Guidance Bureau

In addition to playing important roles in North Korean national security decisions, several of these counterparts report directly to Kim Jong Un. Following a successful defense summit meeting, each US official could dispatch a personal letter to their respective counterpart, inviting them to meet. Such an unprecedented meeting would have three primary goals. First, to give either side the opportunity to air grievances about the conduct of the other and rationalize their own conduct, which is very likely to occur should the meeting actually take place. US officials should expect verbal hostility from the North Korean delegation, but it may be necessary to endure it for the sake of a dialogue that begins to clarify (not necessarily reduce) gaps in perceptions between the two sides. Second, the meeting would test whether mil-mil diplomacy has buy-in from other national security actors in North Korea. If it concludes amicably, then non-KPA members of the North Korean delegation become presumptive stakeholders in mil-mil diplomacy. Third, a strategic security dialogue of this kind would authorize channels of communication between counterpart organizations, giving license for further engagements at lower levels. US officials will have the opportunity to explain US intent to a broader North Korean audience, clarify “red lines,” and probe the conditions that would make initiating a peace process viable.

**Working-level engagements.** Following a successful minister-level strategic security dialogue, planning for a functional, working-level variant of the strategic security dialogue should begin. It is at this level where strategists and analysts with relevant backgrounds in force posture, nuclear doctrine, or coercion generally might have an opportunity to regularly exchange ideas, probe intentions, explain perceptions, and rationalize decision making to a relevant audience. The ideal model for working-level strategic security dialogues of this type is the now-defunct US-China Strategic Dialogue organized by the US Naval Postgraduate School and Pacific Forum.<sup>53</sup> Because these meetings involved a mix of government officials and outside experts on the US side, they were not considered official government meetings. The informality of a track 1.5 setting of current and former government officials and scholars gave space to Chinese participants in particular to stretch beyond scripted talking points, which in turn allowed US interlocutors to gain insights about Chinese nuclear and strategic thinking. A track 1.5 setting with North Korea could give similar space for conceptual exchange in parallel with recurring track 1 meetings.

## PHASE III

**Mil-mil institutionalization.** The third phase of an engagement process should mark a deeper evolution, building on routinized interactions of elites toward more inclusive national security and military engagements. Regularized mil-mil engagements between the KPA and UN Command will be more durable and more cooperative if they occur in a context where their interaction reports to ministerial-level defense and strategic security dialogues. To that end, both sides should continue to implement—and explore ways to build on—the Comprehensive Military Agreement between North and South Korea as part of the Pyongyang Joint Declaration of September 2018.

Two areas for sustained military negotiation and collaboration involving the United States have priority. One focuses on avoiding violence or accidents in the Yellow Sea. The two sides could discuss protocols for safety, communication, and monitoring activities in the disputed Northern Limit Line maritime boundary that has been a recurring flashpoint, or even creating the space for the two Koreas to negotiate the boundary itself given that North Korea has never accepted its legitimacy.<sup>54</sup> The April 2018 Panmunjom Declaration between North and South Korea already expressed the intent to forge a “practical scheme . . . to create a maritime peace zone” in the area.<sup>55</sup> Mil-mil engagement with the United States could help that vision progress. The second priority area, for collaboration, would address rules for airspace preservation. For the United States and South Korea, the priority is preventing North Korean drone intrusions into the South.<sup>56</sup> For North Korea, the priority is not only preventing US or South Korean drone intrusions into North Korea but also creating buffer space beyond twelve nautical miles from its coast for US reconnaissance flights.<sup>57</sup>

Beyond the two substantive issues of maritime and air safety, mil-mil diplomatic activity should extend into the realms of exchanges—in the form of both reciprocal monitoring of military exercises and military educational exchange opportunities. It is likely that even with an agreement in principle to reciprocate military exchanges and educational opportunities, the KPA will not extend such offers to the United States in the near term. US offers should not be conditioned on a tit-for-tat with the KPA in practice. Inviting KPA officers into the US professional military education system exposes them to a defanged image of the American soldier, ideas about the role of a professional military in democratic societies, and a network of counterparts in the larger transnational profession of arms. Similarly, inviting KPA officers to observe US and coalition military exercises allows them to witness US capability and readiness firsthand, which could have a general deterrence effect that indirectly encourages their restraint and embrace of cooperation.

## Conclusion

Given the nuclear impasse and deepening antipathy that exists between the US and North Korean governments, it is entirely possible that North Korea would resist any sort of routine national security engagement. This, however, only underscores the importance of not treating mil-mil engagement as a panacea, and not seeking engagement only during moments of extreme duress. Many proposals have been developed for how to transform the larger US-North Korean relationship—and mil-mil engagement can be a complement to those strategies.<sup>58</sup> But national security engagement alone has little prospect of converting enemies into friends.



North Korean leader Kim Jong Un during a meeting with US President Donald Trump in Hanoi, Vietnam, on February 28, 2019. (Photo by Doug Mills/New York Times)

The agenda proposed above is but one model for how military diplomacy with North Korea could proceed even if the larger geopolitical rivalry remains in place (though its success would be much more likely as part of a more comprehensive approach to relationship transformation). Even if both governments enthusiastically embraced some form of mil-mil engagement, it would

be unrealistic to expect it alone to lead to the resolution of a deep rivalry more than seventy years in the making. Instead, the primary goal of national security diplomacy with North Korea is to put the United States in a marginally better position to preserve nuclear stability, avoid war, and capitalize on opportunities for positive change as they arise by thickening ties with North Korean elites. Logic and evidence suggests national security engagement with North Korea can do just that.



# Notes

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