

## Working Paper

### A Win-Win Strategy to Transform North Korea<sup>1</sup>

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*Abstract: The international community has exhausted all normal options for curbing North Korea's nuclear ambitions. All efforts, including Trump's threat of "fire and fury," and his presidential flattering diplomacy, have failed. Realistically, total denuclearization in the Korea Peninsula will not be possible. Instead, the US should acknowledge North Korea's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program while drawing the DPRK into the international community. Over the long term, the transformation of the Hermit Kingdom may very well present the best opportunity to stabilize the North's nuclear endeavor, and most possibly, DPRK's nuclear capability might serve US strategic interests in engaging, if not containing Russia and China.*

*In order to enjoy the acknowledgement of its ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program, North Korea must commit itself to abide by international norms and conventions adhered to by other nuclear states under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and to the verifiable abandonment of its long-range missile program. Pyongyang also must return to the International Atomic Energy Agency. It must subject itself to vigorous inspections, constant monitoring, and verification of all measures agreed to through a strong, reliable, and permanent program not subject to reversal. Failure to cooperate fully in the implementation of these steps will result in the rejection of any nuclear program for North Korea and the re-implementation of the strongest international sanctions.*

*The goal of approaching a win-win scenario for all the key actors (DPRK, ROK, Japan, US, China, Russia) is reachable, but US must combine short (rapprochement), medium (reconciliation), and long (transforming) term strategies in order to achieve a win-win scenario, and a very-possible, stable situation favorable to the US and our allies without resorting to militarized conflict. These steps should be conducted through diplomacy, negotiations, acknowledgment by joint statements (communiques) and mutual implementations.*

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In response to Kim Jong-un's 2019 New Year's Day Speech, calling for a second US-DPRK Summit as to produce an outcome that is to be "welcomed by the international community," Donald Trump has no hesitation for his long-prepared meeting with Kim. There is no doubt that the new development with the calling for the second US-DPRK Summit continues to boost an unprecedented expectation for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula. My proposal is to provide both a realistic and an optimistic projection. Realistically, total denuclearization in the Korea Peninsula will not be possible. Instead, the US should acknowledge North Korea's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program while drawing the DPRK into the international community. Over the long term this may very well present the best opportunity to stabilize the North's nuclear endeavor, and most possibly, DPRK's nuclear capability might serve US strategic interests in engaging, if not containing Russia and China. What separates this proposal from previous attempts at engagement is a combination of new geopolitical dynamics, both cross and mutual-benefit, and a fundamental transformation in Washington's willingness to take decisive action against Pyongyang if a deal cannot be reached. With an understanding of the historical and current situations on the peninsula, an accord based upon cross-benefit and positive reinforcement that paves the way for future cooperation offers the best chance for US-DPRK engagement.

In order to enjoy the acknowledgement of its ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program, North Korea must commit itself to abide by international norms and conventions adhered to by other nuclear states under the Non-Proliferation Treaty and the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, and to the verifiable abandonment of its long-range missile program. Pyongyang also must return to the International Atomic Energy Agency. It must subject itself to vigorous inspections, constant monitoring, and verification of all measures agreed to through a strong, reliable, and permanent program not subject to reversal. Failure to cooperate fully in the implementation of these steps will result in rejection of any nuclear program for North Korea and the re-implementation of the strongest international sanctions.

The goal of approaching a win-win scenario for all the key actors (DPRK, ROK, Japan, US, China, Russia) is reachable, but US must combine short (rapprochement), medium (reconciliation), and long (transforming) term strategies in order to achieve a win-win scenario, and a very possible stable situation favorable to the US and our allies without resorting to militarized conflict. These steps should be conducted through diplomacy, negotiations, acknowledgment by joint statements (communiqués) and mutual implementations.

North Korea is in a unique geopolitical situation because of its proximity to both China and Russia. Previous strategic assessments regarding military options have always caused anxiety in Washington because the possibility of running the risk of escalating to all-out war on the Peninsula. Geographical facts precluded a military option, because the risks of escalation and a broadening of the conflict were simply too high. When considering ongoing tensions in the Asia-Pacific region, the risk that misinterpretation and misunderstanding could lead to a mushrooming of the conflict would trump the utility of a military option. The volatility of the wider region made the risk of escalation simply too great to entertain a military option.

Today, decision makers in Washington have to deal with a multitude of complicated foreign policy issues. Crises in the East China Sea, South China Sea, Afghanistan, and the Ukraine, just to name a few, can dominate a day's schedule. Furthermore, these are some of the hot spots of the moment – they do not reflect systemic problems, including the Korean Peninsula, but also Israel, Palestine, South Asia, and the Persian Gulf. On a daily basis, all of these potential areas of conflict place great strains on planning and policy making. Add in other issues, both domestic and foreign, that requires the administration's time, and suddenly the ability to expend sufficient time on the Korean Peninsula looks increasingly less likely. Take into account the current fiscal realities in Washington and resource constraints can rapidly eviscerate policy options. In this environment, breaking the deadlock in Northeast Asia changes dynamics for Washington decision makers at a particularly important period given the US rebalance regarding the Asia-Pacific region. Specifically, a change in regional dynamics would allow US policy makers to corral the regional focus more directly on territorial disputes in the East and South China Seas. Currently China, Japan, North Korea, South Korea, and the United States are locked in a never-ending cycle of relationship ebbs and flows. Maneuvering will persist no matter the standing of North Korea; however, reducing the tensions in the region – implicitly improving relations amongst the Northeast Asian states – will mitigate some of the posturing that has taken place. From a Washington policymaker's vantage point, this will allow the US to place a greater focus on territorial issues that are still in their infancy rather than dwell obsessively on the Korean Peninsula.

In a strategic sense, for the US this deal is clearly about changing the geopolitical dynamics in Northeast Asia in Washington's favor. For over sixty years, whenever Pyongyang has decided to flail out, the region has been trapped in a temporary paralysis. Even after the end of the Cold War, Northeast Asia is one of the few places where mid-twentieth century dynamics, including stratification, persist. The US-DPRK engagement, generating a win-win scenario among all interested parties, will decrease tensions in the region, thus Washington will have reached a notable success in its history of involvement in Northeast Asia. Broadening US policy options around the world, as a result of improved stability on the Korean Peninsula, is in the best interests of the US Administration and should be its seminal goal.

From Kim Jong-un's perspective, what the United States presents the DPRK gives him strategic flexibility and significant prestige without substantially altering his regime's status. From a realist and positive viewpoint, the acknowledgment of DPRK's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program is better for the long-term US strategic interests and a controllable situation in every respect – be it defense, economics, or social, in the region where Russia and China will remain as short-term challengers and long-term rival powers.

China will probably be the most concerned about improved US-North Korea relations; however, that may not be readily apparent at first. The Xi Jinping Administration will more than likely avoid making too many public statements on the matter because it is not likely to view improved US-North Korea ties as an improvement from its perspective. However, greater North Korean autonomy and a more stable Northeast Asia will lead to a greater focus placed on events elsewhere in the Asia-Pacific region. Given ongoing tensions in both the East and South China Seas, Beijing may regard increased focus on its coastal territorial disputes as a negative. From a different perspective, on the positive side, improved US-North Korea relations actually

make China's problems with North Korean immigration and separatist sentiment among its ethnic Korean population less significant. A more stable DPRK will help reduce the inflow of refugees into Liaoning and Jilin provinces in northeast China, thereby improving civil governance in the area. In general, these developments will help curtail some of the separatist concerns CCP officials have over the ethnic Korean minority. So, while at first US-North Korea cooperation may seem to work in China's detriment, over the long run it will actually work in Beijing's favor.

From a positive viewpoint, the improved situation in the Peninsula with a stabilized North Korea is better for Japan in every respect – be it defense, economics, or social. In addition to the sentimental issue of the abductions, Japanese government and public are most concerned over the North Korea nuclear program. As Victor Cha pointed out, “Ever since North Korea in 1998 fired a missile across it [Japan], landing in the Pacific Ocean, [distance] is no longer a sanctuary, but [now Japan is] an integral part of mainland Asia military space”, making the one-time luxury of island isolation no more. If current dynamics on the Korean Peninsula persist, and without major policy shifts change is unlikely, the DPRK will probably continue to invest in and strengthen its nuclear arsenal. As Pyongyang's delivery systems continue to improve in both quantity and quality, in parallel with its weapons of mass destruction program, the risk to Tokyo only increases.

It can be assumed that the stability in the Peninsula will open up markets for the Japanese firms. In light of this conundrum, access to low cost labor in North Korea, even on a limited basis, represents an offset for Japanese firms that have suffered from China-Japan tensions of late. More important though, Kim Jong-un's willingness to provide a complete account of kidnapping victims' whereabouts will help bring closure to a horrific chapter in Japan's history. From a geopolitical standpoint the agreement, as previously mentioned, helps refocus regional states on territorial disputes. In particular, Japan can leverage progress on North Korea to refocus its partners' attention on the Diaoyudao Island issue. The nuclear matter, in light of all the aforementioned benefits, may not appear as dire as once thought. Given Washington's demonstrated willingness to support Tokyo on matters of self-defense already, there should be little cause for alarm. Taken as a whole, this deal improves strategic stability, which enables greater attention on the East China Sea. Clearly the proposed US-North Korea agreement is a great benefit for Japan.

Russia is something of an outlier in this examination, if only because its relationship with North Korea has been very frenetic in recent years. Presumably, Russia's biggest concern is the perception that improved US-North Korea relations only further contain Russia. Given Moscow's weakening economic position, handling this issue may not be so difficult. It is noted, as Victor Cha points out, that “Russia's ultimate dream is to run gas pipelines through northern Korea to the energy-hungry economies in the ROK, Japan, and other parts of East Asia, and to reconnect the Trans-Siberian Railway to enable cargo transport from Europe to Asia.” Therefore, incentive already exists for a stable Northeast Asia. Three specific factors could very easily work to further alleviate Russian suspicions. First, Russia's growing cooperation with Japan and South Korea already serves as a means to circumvent the mercurial North Korea. Second, Washington

can go a long way in alleviating Russian fears by approaching them on the issue of missile defense in the Asia-Pacific. The opportunity to reduce concerns over the North Korean nuclear program could potentially lead to a change in the missile defense posture of the US and its allies and partners in the region. While particular systems will still need to remain in place, there can at least be a dialogue in shifting or clarifying the focus. This is probably a small concession, and it is a long way off, but just broaching the subject could have utility for the US and Russia. Third, Vladivostok freezes for nearly six months out of the year, so a warmer water port in North Korea that Russia would have access to could be a huge boon for the economy in the Russian Far East. These three factors can help reduce the Kremlin's concerns over Pyongyang-Washington engagement.

It is highly anticipated that assurance aspects for South Korea will be built into the proposed accord. From a conventional standpoint, DPRK troops present a significant threat to South Korea. Add in the threat posed by Pyongyang's missile systems and its nuclear capability, the risks posed to the government in Seoul increase exponentially. Rather than demand the North eliminate its nuclear capability, which still does not address its conventional strength, it is prudent to work toward developing dialogues that reduce the possibility for misperception and misunderstanding. Collectively, the proposed accord addresses a number of assurance and deterrence challenges that are vital for South Korean policy makers.

Clearly South Korea has the most to gain from North Korea-US engagement. There will certainly be concerns about US unilateralism and what an agreement might mean for the DPRK's long term prospects. However, for a variety of reasons, this proposal works in the South's favor. From an economic standpoint, opening markets in the North at least carries with it the possibility of slowly bringing the DPRK economy to a subsistence level. A functioning economy through trade in North Korea is vital in the near future. It will make the task for policy-makers in Seoul much easier. Even the smallest economic successes in the North will lead to a direct loosening of the economic burden on Seoul. Furthermore, from a social standpoint, any chance to bring Pyongyang into the international system will ease the human costs of its further isolation from the rest of the world. Active communication by developing transparency and confidence building measures (TCBM) will promote regional stability, which in turn will improve day-to-day economic functions in the region, especially between the North and the South. Principally, without the looming threat of North Korean provocations, the South will be in a better position to attract foreign business. The benefits to Seoul of Pyongyang-Washington cooperation are incalculable.

I will provide the following projections for short, medium and long terms, along with explanation on selected projections.

### **1. Short-Term (1-3 Years): Rapprochement Period**

- A. US develops transparency and confidence building measures with DPRK (TCBM)
- B. US acknowledges DPRK's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program
- C. US promises no regime change in DPRK to bar Pyongyang going on the offensive
- D. US works with other signatory countries to formally end the Korean War

***Specifies on transparency and confidence building measures (TCBM):*** Developing the TCBM should be considered a mechanism for strengthening strategic stability. Nuclear weapon states are held to a higher standard as more is expected of them in order to curtail catastrophic incidents. The ability to observe North Korea's nuclear program and Pyongyang's agreement to provide advance notification of other major military activities demonstrates an increased willingness to participate in the international community. Regarding observation missions the US and DPRK, as part of the 1994 Agreed Framework, had previously agreed to an inspection regime. Tying inspections to something the US might have difficulty in delivering seems problematic now, but the lesson to be learned in this is to link inspections to something that can be done immediately – like legitimizing the nuclear program. Such action bypasses the political hurdles in Washington, specifically Congressional approval. Returning to the current dealing with DPRK, Kim Jong-un's acceptance of a mutually agreed proposal, nuclear inspections and the like, will be crucial steps in making the nuclear program palatable. Acknowledging Pyongyang's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program is contingent on its continued work to maintain and bolster the TCBM regime. With the US "no regime change" promise and its acknowledgment of DPRK's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program, North Koreans will experience the reliable credibility of the US government. Trust and goodwill between Washington and Pyongyang serve as both the condition and the consequence to develop TCBM. Across the spectrum of defense, economics, and societal disciplines, TCBM offers a holistic approach to reducing mistrust and misunderstanding. With TCBM in place, direct, bilateral dialogue with the US would grant North Korea a level of policy autonomy it has not enjoyed, quite possibly, in its history. This step would afford Kim Jong-un the opportunity to return to the policy approach of his grandfather, Kim Il-sung, during the Cold War – multiple powers vying for the North's favor. Broadly speaking, this is the most impactful message that can emerge from a Pyongyang-Washington breakthrough.

***Specifies on the acknowledgment of DPRK's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program:*** Following the geopolitical transformation that transpired with the fall of the Soviet Union and the North's economic collapse, Pyongyang has become focused on ensuring regime survival. The regime has sought to offset the patronage system with fresh instruments intended to blackmail other states into providing tacit support. For a variety of reasons, the Kim family regime has concentrated on nuclear weapons as the primary mode to achieve this goal. In particular, as other legitimizing mechanisms erode, the state's threat of nuclear reprisals in the event of a foreign attempt to force regime change has become the single greatest pillar keeping Kim Jong-un in power. The use of political coercion – through the nuclear weapon program – has ensured regime survival but at considerable cost. Viewed as a pariah state throughout much of the international community, Pyongyang has fulfilled its own prophecy. Isolated from much of the rest of the world, North Korea's prospects for economic recovery and a renaissance in the North are bleak at best. With few friends left, the Kim family rules a state that is on virtual life support, prolonged largely by the threat of nuclear retaliation. Indeed, some may argue that the DPRK's very survival is now dependent on nuclear weapons, which unfortunately, makes it all the less likely that North Korea will relinquish its nuclear weapon program any time soon. Regardless, the dark cloud this capability has created will help prolong the regime's existence but could also ensure its perpetual stagnation in addition to regional instability.

The Kim family regime has made its nuclear weapons program the hallmark of a state loathed the world over for its flaunting of internationally accepted norms of behavior. Under the protection of weapons of mass destruction (WMD), the government has had the freedom of action to oppress its people and coerce neighboring states with the use of blackmail and extortion tactics. Despite conventional forces in a state of almost perpetual decay, the DPRK has had the freedom of action to conduct skirmishes with the ROK without fear of reprisal. This blatant disregard for accepted international norms and the lack of a response in kind largely stems from its nuclear arsenal. The threat of an apocalyptic conflict, a 21st century employment of the nuclear brinkmanship concept, has created an asymmetric scenario in Northeast Asia. Therefore, North Korea has transformed nuclear weapons into the ultimate insurance policy. In doing so, it is increasingly less likely Pyongyang will forfeit its lone tool for regime survival any time soon. Even more troubling, beyond just a defensive tool, Pyongyang's nuclear weapon capacity has become an instrument of offensive coercion. Simply possessing WMD capability proven to have the range to strike South Korea has emboldened Pyongyang into taking aggressive actions against Seoul.

As it further enhances delivery systems, North Korea will be able to elevate the deterrence value of its nuclear program. Someday soon it will pose a distinct threat to neighbors in the Asia-Pacific region, and possibly even the US homeland. The danger in the modernization of the North's delivery systems is that it may further empower the regime to take even more provocative action beyond just shelling South Korean islands, torpedoing South Korean submarines, and conducting missile tests over Japanese territory. The unconventional challenge Pyongyang symbolizes has afforded it the operational space needed to adopt provocative domestic and foreign policies beyond any international standard of acceptability.

It is worth noting that once it becomes clear that a state possesses nuclear weapons the window of opportunity to deter acquisition is shut, leaving little hope for relinquishment. To be clear, once completed, the domestic costs associated with ending a nuclear weapon program are even higher than they were during the research and development phase. The opportunity cost of acquiring the capability makes it almost impossible to justify forfeiture. With that being said, the desirability of any military option decreases exponentially once it has been successfully tested. It is widely believed that the North Koreans will consider nuclear retaliation against the United States directly if it is attacked. In virtually every scenario, the risks of a detonation are simply too great to take military action. Essentially, nuclear states achieve the basic goal of acquisition – regime security from foreign aggression.

Unfortunately, the resolve of the global order to compel a state to relinquish its weapons is, to put it mildly, fickle. With the understanding that deterrence has failed the international community will often, gradually, reengage with the state in question. This pattern has been seen in cases such as China, India, and Pakistan. In this vein, although acknowledging Pyongyang's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program is a major public relations victory for the North, the negative pressure the program has garnered the Kims throughout the years would suddenly be greatly relieved by this move. Just as significant, it gives Kim Jong-un a seat at the table of nuclear states and elevates his prestige – no small victory for a man in his thirties. Considering that legitimacy for its hallmark weapons program has been Pyongyang's seminal

policy objective for decades, this offer would radically transform and empower Kim Jong-un's standing, both at home and abroad.

With respect to specific details in the proposal, this accord is designed to promote cross and mutual-benefit. Some elements are mutually beneficial insofar as they pose advantages for both states, the special economic zones (SEZ) being a prime example. However, cross-benefit also exists where one aspect of the accord may benefit the US and another will benefit North Korea. This comprehensive approach to creating value establishes an environment wherein both North Korea and the US will find advantages to cooperation. Once the terms of the deal are announced, the first matter that will assuredly draw attention is the acknowledgment of Pyongyang's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program. The fact of the matter remains that if a state is determined to break with international norms of behavior, compelling that state to change policy direction is profoundly difficult. Short of military confrontation, options to bring a state back into the fold are limited. It is important to note that even when the bitterest of enemies, India and Pakistan, fought during the Kargil War, neither of them used the nuclear weapons that each possessed.

Additionally, the threat of international condemnation and definitive response(s) are largely believed to have deterred a launch during the India-Pakistan conflict. Likewise, it has always been understood by all key stakeholders that a second Korean War might very well lead to a nuclear exchange. For instance, traditionally North Korea's conventional superiority meant that the US and South Korea might well utilize nuclear capabilities as a deterrent. Indeed, part of the explanation for why conflict has not reignited on the Peninsula has been the threat of nuclear retaliation. Whether Pyongyang possesses such capabilities really only further complicates matters for strategic planners but does not change many of the basic challenges. Namely, the threat posed by the North's conventional forces and their proximity to regional population centers is an additional planning factor that must be considered, but nothing more. In any event, the North Korean nuclear program, while an operational obstacle, is not going away any time soon. *Ceteris paribus*, it would be better to gain the benefits of accepting the programs' legitimacy rather than continuing to hold out in the vain hope that Kim Jong-un will abandon its nuclear capabilities.

***Specifies on the promises of no regime change:*** Offering the North, essentially, a promise that the US would not pursue regime change is to bar Pyongyang going on the offensive. It will be deadly wrong if one considers Washington's promise and aid as an appeasement to Pyongyang. As a matter of fact, America's promise and aid offer the North a chance to develop both human and physical capital. Thinking from a North Korean perspective, food aid is a tool to improve the physical well-being of the people. Likewise, energy aid is a valuable asset in improving the effectiveness and efficiency of North Korean industry and raising the value of the state's physical capital. It goes without saying that the Kim Jong-un regime would be benefited by investing in its human and physical capital to improve standards of living without losing the state's identity.

## **2. Medium-Term (3-7 Years): Reconciliation Period**

A. US lifts economic sanction with conditions met by the DPRK



- B. US gradually increases its energy and food aid to DPRK
- C. US normalizes its diplomatic relations with DPRK
- D. US engages trade with DPRK

***Specifies on trade:*** In this time of tremendous change in North Korea and the region, the US has an opportunity to alter politics fundamentally in Northeast Asia in a monumental fashion. Starting from 2002 when the North and South Koreans launched the most notable Kaesong Industrial park as a collaborative economic development, this Special Administrative Industrial Region provided North Korea with an important source of foreign investment. Following Kim Jong-Il's interests in China's booming special economic zone of Shenzhen, the young Kim re-opened the Kaesong Industrial Park as an attempt to normalize diplomatic relations with Seoul in 2013. There is reason to believe that economic necessity inside DPRK demands the regime to channel its motivation for trade, especially through free-trade zone developments with ROK and PRC.

US trade engagement with DPRK would make the DPRK's position tenable over the long term, especially considering the fact that its bitterness toward China may present a challenge down the road if and when the North has to rely on its old ally. However, for now and the foreseeable future, a void exists that Washington policy makers can fill in order to change the strategic outlook on the peninsula. Taking advantage of the willingness on both Washington and Pyongyang to engage in dialogues, the United States can move to direct, bilateral talks on trade initiatives. Offering a mutually-beneficial relationship that outlines areas of cooperation and positive reinforcements which both parties will find advantageous is a means to convince the North to practice continuing engagement.

While Washington will have to allow Kim Jong-un a wide berth to manage the growth of these areas, even the slightest progress is better in comparison to the closed-door, self-reliant economic policy that has prevailed over the DPRK's history. Given the closed nature of North Korean society, even the smallest opening could help curtail problems which are the result of years of Northern isolation.

In a similar vein, allowing increased tourism to and from North Korea can help tear down some of the cultural barriers that have developed. Again, this process will be slow in development, but once it starts, it can prove beneficial over the long term. The notion of entering the international system is extremely sensitive for North Korea; however, recent actions on the part of Kim Jong un, including engaging with regional neighbors and exploring the use of SEZs suggests a new willingness to function in the international community. What makes this accord particularly valuable is that it offers the North an opportunity to engage abroad in ways it can control, which is a truly valuable negotiating chip for the US.

Just as America often seeks to bring closed societies into the global community, it also strives to represent the interests of the disenfranchised around the world. The success of this noble pursuit may be debated, but time and again Americans have gone to great lengths to help raise living standards for those beyond their borders.

Given Pyongyang's long-held views on human rights, any progress here will require great compromise elsewhere. However, to improve the lives of North Koreans that have suffered for far too long, what this proposal requires of the US Administration is worth it. Reenergizing the food aid program will greatly boost the livelihoods of many North Koreans given the likely trickledown effect that will take place. However, the most important and most difficult issue that must be addressed are the political prisons – a tragedy that simply cannot be ignored any longer. The desire to address these issues is nothing new for many Americans. This agreement simply elevates philanthropic pursuits and reprioritizes Washington's focus on helping raise standards of living for many in the North. These steps are vitally important to bringing along US domestic support for the accord.

### **3. Long Term (7-10 Years): Transforming Period**

- A. US permits North Korean visits to US civilian and military nuclear facilities
- B. US is willing to become DPRK's new super power patron
- C. US' strategical engagement with North Korea strengthens the regional stability

***Specifies on North Korean visits to US nuclear facilities:*** Offering Kim Jong-un's regime additional TCBM's in the form of US nuclear site visits and various notifications are additional mechanisms to reduce tensions in Northeast Asia. Being able to see US nuclear facilities allows the North opportunities to understand better various options for the direction its nuclear program could take. There are differences in personnel quality, procedures, and so on among the US, Russia, and China – and these visits would give North Korean experts the chance to observe how Americans approach the nuclear profession. Certainly, it is a learning experience that all could benefit from. Specific details in terms of the background(s) and quantity of observers can be negotiated at a later date, but the program in its entirety will help minimize suspicions between the two states. Likewise, notifying Pyongyang of major US military activities and movements reduces the risk of misunderstanding. It further increases the value and credibility of accepting both the nuclear program and the negative security guarantee by reducing the likelihood of a surprise attack. Taken collectively, all of these mechanisms would help improve strategic stability and give Kim Jong-un a feasible alternative to the current stalemate.

***Specifies on US as DPRK's new patron:*** The history of DPRK, since its founding in 1948, reveals one crucial characteristics of this tiny state, that is, it must use great power patronage as leverage to ensure its regime survival. Throughout the Cold War years, Kim Il-sung used the PRC and USSR against one another. Kim Il-sung successfully created a bidding war between the two great poles of communism that allowed North Korea to receive preferential trade agreements and technological assistance. The fall of the Soviet Union, and the diplomatic rapprochement between PRC and ROK in 1992 resulted in the absence of a friendly great power by its side, Kim Jong-Il realized that North Korea's structural fragility became rapidly apparent. Kim Jong-Il took considerable effort and time to find a way to replicate the patronage competition that had supported the regime throughout the Cold War. When the DPRK was fraught with famine in the 1990s, Kim Jong-Il had to rely on overseas development assistance and charitable donations from states such as Japan, the PRC, the ROK, and the US. During the late years of Kim Jong-Il and since Kim Jong-un's time, North Korea has been forced to search for the means and

mechanisms to modernize its patronage system to meet 21st century geopolitical realities. Rather than feeding off competing communist states, the DPRK is now employing a range of diplomatic tools to leverage assistance from China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the US. Arguably, the bipolar balance North Korea sought to strike during the Cold War has been replaced by a multipolar system with at least five states finding themselves driven to support the Kim family. Despite tremendous economic failings, astronomical military investments, and a deplorable human rights record, the Kim dynasty continues to survive by applying the time-honored skill of leveraging the international political environment.

***Specifies on US' strategic engagement with North Korea and the regional stability:*** Early 21st century saw both a record economic growth and more political/military resolution for its continental disputes with neighboring countries. For Chinese political leaders, it is no longer enough to emphasize domestic economic growth. However, as years of double digit growth fade into memory many are looking to find other potential sources of economic growth. In parallel, there is a growing sense that the defense spending that has come with economic success gives China better foreign policy options. Many Chinese would argue that the days of having to accept foreign designs for their homeland have come to an end. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) serves as its roadmap to the future ambition and an unprecedented confidence.

Today, the most recognizable epicenters of confrontation are in the East and South China Seas. Recent history over the last two centuries saw a rolling back of Chinese dominion across much of its periphery. The island chains to its east and south are no different. European colonialism and Japanese imperialism led to Chinese losses across the region. Given the natural resources believed to exist under the ocean floor and the two seas' role as vital shipping lanes, control of the various island chains in the area is critically important. Beijing has taken to provocative military action in an attempt to force countries like Japan, the Philippines, and Vietnam to withdraw their territorial claims. Domineering actions on the part of the Chinese have not gone unnoticed. Many countries in the Asia-Pacific region are developing intraregional defense partnerships, while also turning to states like the US and Russia for assistance. As the Xi Administration continues to take an assertive stance on territorial disputes, the response from China's neighbors will only become more abrasive. Into this volatile mix North Korea sits almost completely alone. Having discussed the DPRK's geopolitical position throughout this document, the main point of emphasis at this juncture is its limited options. If engagements with Japan, Russia, and South Korea prove unrewarding – and there are ample reasons to suggest that they might – and if North Korea cannot develop a partnership with the US, then it will suddenly be back in the same place it has been for over two decades. Pyongyang will once again be reliant on Beijing for its continued existence. Given Kim Jong-un's attempts to distance himself from his patron it would not be unreasonable to suggest that China would want to take a more assertive role in North Korea as well.

At the present time there is an opportunity for meaningful US-North Korea engagement. The deterioration in China-North Korea relations has led to a series of changes in the DPRK senior leadership – in both human and policy perspectives. To date, these shifts can be seen in Pyongyang's sudden attempts at engagement with Moscow, Seoul, and Tokyo. And, perhaps most notably, the circumstances surrounding the execution of Jang Sung Taek could not have more thoroughly demonstrated Kim Jong-un's desire to separate himself from Beijing. Into this

transformative time, Washington can interject with a bold and daring engagement strategy. By participating in direct talks with the North, Trump Administration officials can circumvent

some of the cancerous obstacles that come with multilateralism. Even more noteworthy, making acceptance of the North's nuclear program and a negative security guarantee the hallmarks of this proposal represent a substantive policy shift in the US. The proposal outlined here and the manner with which the entire process associated with it could be executed, outlines a way forward thinking approach in resolving the most pressing issues in the region. The ultimate goal for the US in embarking on this path is strengthening regional, and consequently strategic, stability – something both noble and attainable. Over the long term, the transformation of the Hermit Kingdom may very well present the best opportunity to stabilize the North's nuclear endeavor, and most possibly, DPRK's nuclear capability might serve US strategic interests in engaging, if not containing Russia and China.

## **Final Note**

What separates this proposal from so many other attempts at engagement with North Korea in the past lies in how the nuclear question is addressed. The emphasis of previous agreements was forcing Pyongyang to relinquish its nuclear weapon program. However, the international community has exhausted all normal options for curbing the North's nuclear ambitions. Literally, almost all efforts, including Trump's latest threat with "fire and fury," and his presidential flattering diplomacy, have failed. The intrusiveness of prior accords helped reinforce negative assumptions on the part of all participants. Concerns bred suspicions, followed by mistrust, and, ultimately, accusations whenever there was so much as a hint of noncompliance. And while it can be argued that US officials were more willing to accept a greater degree of DPRK noncompliance than vice versa, the American media's ability to excite public opinion certainly limits options for US decision makers. Washington officials are simply unable to look the other way when the strategic picture outweighs minor operational missteps.

This proposal suggests that the US, through the Trump-Kim Summit(s) and all channel talks with the North Koreans, acknowledges Pyongyang's ability to maintain a carefully limited nuclear program. Furthermore, the embedded TCBM's offer the opportunity to build communication and confidence on a bilateral basis. This is vital in reducing the long-term tensions that have been permitted to build up due to a lack of communication. The Hermit Kingdom will not come out of its shell overnight; neither will the U.S. drop all its many veils. But significant increases in Pyongyang's revenue stream will encourage more joint ventures and will reduce the North's reliance on other states – namely China. The open-ended and mutually beneficial characteristics of this long-term strategy serve as advocacy tools for further cooperation.