

North Korea's Shift to Diplomacy in 2018: A Result of U.S. Pressure or North Korean Security Calculus?

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Abstract

After conducting a record number of missile and nuclear tests in 2016 and 2017, North Korea dramatically changed its policy approach and embarked on a diplomatic initiative in 2018. It announced a self-imposed halt on missile and nuclear tests and held summit meetings with the United States, China, and South Korea from spring of that year.

Why did North Korea shift its policy approach? This paper evaluates four alternative explanations. The first is that the change was driven by North Korea's security calculus. In other words, North Korea planned to achieve its security goals first before turning to diplomacy and successfully followed through with this plan. The second is that U.S. military threats forced North Korea to change its course. The third is that U.S.-led sanctions caused North Korea to shift its policy by increasing economic pain on the country. The fourth is that diplomatic initiatives by South Korea and others prompted North Korea to change its position.

This paper examines the actions and statements of the United States, North Korea, China, South Korea, and Russia leading up to and during this period to assess these four explanations. It concludes that military threats and economic pain did not dissuade North Korea from obtaining what it considered an adequate level of nuclear deterrence against the United States and that North Korea turned to diplomacy only after achieving its security goals.

External pressure may have encouraged North Korea to speed up its efforts to develop the capacity to strike the United States with a nuclear-armed missile, the opposite of its intended effect. Diplomatic and economic pressure may have compelled Kim Jong Un to declare that North Korea had achieved its "state nuclear force" before conducting all the nuclear and ballistic missile tests needed to be fully confident that it could hit targets in the continental United States. These findings suggest that if a pressure campaign against North Korea is to achieve its intended impact, the United States has to more carefully consider how pressure would interact with North Korean policy priorities. Pressure should be applied only to pursue specific achievable goals and should be frequently assessed for its impact.

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Introduction

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un actively pursued nuclear and missile tests for the first six years after taking office in 2011. North Korea conducted four nuclear tests and test-fired 80 ballistic missiles of various ranges from 2011 to 2017, roughly twice the number of such tests under his father Kim Jong Il's 17-year rule.¹ About half of the missile test-firings were in 2016 and 2017. North Korea capped the series of tests in November 2017 with a launch of the Hwasong-15 intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), its most powerful missile yet.

But North Korea sharply changed its policy approach in early 2018. Kim Jong Un began the year with a message that he was open to improving inter-Korean relations and accepted an invitation by South Korea to send a senior North Korean delegation to the 2018 Winter Olympics held in Pyeongchang. In April 2018, the North Korean leader announced a self-imposed ban on nuclear and missile tests. From early spring, he held summit meetings with leaders of the United States, China, and South Korea.

Why did North Korea shift its policy approach and embark on a diplomatic initiative?

Observers have offered competing explanations for the change. Some credit the unprecedented international pressure for the shift. In March 2018, then-Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Mike Pompeo told CBS News that the U.S. pressure campaign “has had a real impact on the regime, on the North Korean economy, and has caused North Korea to reach out.”² The next month, the U.N. Secretary General agreed that the internationally coordinated sanctions “had a very important impact, and to a certain extent made North Korea realize that it was necessary to come forward.”³

Others believe that North Korea's policy change was driven by its own security calculus. Scholar Van Jackson says that Kim planned all along to pursue diplomacy after acquiring a plausible second-strike nuclear capability, as that would allow him to obtain benefits from a position of strength.⁴ Yet others say Kim Jong Un wanted to shift the basis of his legitimacy from his country's military power to economic achievements that raise North Koreans' standard of living.⁵

This paper examines four alternative explanations in an effort to better understand North Korea's motivations. The first potential explanation is in line with Jackson's assessment that North

¹For example, “North Korean Missile Launches & Nuclear Tests,” CSIS Missile Defense Project, last updated on November 29, 2017, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/north-korea-missile-launches-1984-present/>. As in the CSIS database, the numbers in this paper include only full flight tests of ballistic missiles.

²Then CIA Director Mike Pompeo's comments in “Full Transcript: Face the Nation” on March 11, 2018, *CBS News*, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/full-transcript-face-the-nation-on-march-11-2018-2/>

³“Unity in Security Council was Key to Recent Easing of Tensions on Korean Peninsula – U.N. Chief,” *UN News*, April 23, 2018, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/04/1007952>.

⁴Van Jackson, *On the Brink: Trump, Kim and the Threat of Nuclear War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019, 201.

⁵See, for example, in Kim Jong Un's Desire to Secure Legitimacy Behind Denuclearization Moves, Experts Say, *Washington Times*, September 6, 2018, <https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/sep/6/kim-jong-un-north-korea-denuclearization-effort-se/>

Korea's policy shift was driven by its security calculus. In this view, external pressure had little to do with North Korea's decisions. North Korea did what it had planned all along: achieve its security goals before turning to diplomacy. The second explanation is that U.S. military threats forced North Korea to change its course. This view emphasizes the impact of U.S. military threats against North Korea, which increased after Trump took office in 2017, on its behavior. The third explanation is in line with Pompeo's argument that U.S.-led economic sanctions pressured North Korea into shifting its policy. In this view, North Korea came to the diplomatic table because it wanted the international community to ease sanctions, which had reached an unprecedented level in 2017. The fourth explanation is that North Korea changed its policy because of diplomatic initiatives extended by some of its neighbors. South Korea in particular offered olive branches to North Korea repeatedly after President Moon Jae-in came into office in May 2017.

The paper begins with a discussion of the data used for the analysis, followed by background on North Korea's nuclear and missile capability and on the events surrounding the escalation of tensions in 2017. An analysis of the North Korean policy shift follows.

The paper concludes that North Korea's security calculus best explains its turn from confrontation to diplomacy, but that external pressure may have had some impact. North Korea planned to achieve a major security threshold with its nuclear weapons development before turning to diplomacy and economic development. This goal did not change because of U.S. military threats or economic sanctions. North Korea may have sped up its nuclear weapons plan because of the pressure, as Jackson has also argued. The pressure may have also forced North Korea to declare that it had achieved its goal of being able to strike the continental United States with a nuclear-armed missile, even though it had only demonstrated that the system would work effectively under test rather than operational conditions. The diplomatic overtures by South Korea mattered only when North Korea was ready to respond to them for its policy shift. North Korea could have changed course without them.

Data

This paper examines statements and actions by the United States, North Korea, China, Russia and South Korea to determine which of the four explanations above—or combination of explanations—best explains North Korea's shift in policy from 2017 to 2018.

The data for the United States includes statements by top leaders and senior government officials, as well as media reports that describe U.S. intentions. The study also examines U.S. actions on both military and economic fronts, including U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises, U.S. "show of force" flights to the Korean Peninsula, movements of U.S. strike carrier groups, and U.S. decisions on U.N. and unilateral sanctions.

The paper also looks at North Korean statements and commentary reported in official media. Reports in the North Korean official media provide a window into the country's thinking because

they are routinely used to communicate policy goals both internally and externally.⁶ In particular, the study looks at statements on the Foreign Ministry website, the *Rodong Sinmun* (the internally oriented newspaper of the Workers' Party of Korea), and the Korean Central News Agency (the externally oriented state news agency). Reports were analyzed based on the level of authority of those quoted, the number of articles, and the tone and timing of their publication. The timing and pace of North Korea's nuclear and missile tests were another important source of data. (Data on 2017 nuclear and missile tests are included in the timeline in Appendix A.)

To understand South Korean policy, the study examines statements by top government officials, as well as South Korean media reports. For China and Russia, it looks at official media reports and the timing, content, and frequency of visits by Chinese or Russian officials to North Korea or North Korean delegations' visits to the two countries.

Background

Obama administration. The United States considers North Korea's nuclear weapons capability a major regional and global threat and has long tried to rid the country of its nuclear weapons program using diplomacy. Thus far, the United States has negotiated two major denuclearization agreements with North Korea.⁷ But the deals, which gave North Korea diplomatic and economic benefits in exchange for an end to its nuclear weapons program, proved unsuccessful, as both sides accused the other of failing to implement its side of the bargain.⁸

Trump's immediate predecessor Barack Obama pursued a policy of "strategic patience," which was designed to pressure the North Korean regime until it returned to denuclearization talks.⁹ Under this policy, the United States imposed sanctions on North Korea and carried out arms interdictions while trying to convince China to take a tougher stance on its neighbor and maintaining close coordination with U.S. allies Japan and South Korea.

The Obama administration also negotiated the so-called "Leap Day Agreement" in February 2012, shortly after Kim Jong Un took power in December 2011. This deal committed North Korea to a moratorium on missile and nuclear tests, as well as nuclear activities at its main nuclear facility in Yongbyon, in exchange for food assistance. The agreement collapsed as North Korea launched a long-range rocket two months later.¹⁰

⁶An example of studies that analyze North Korean media outputs include Patrick McEachern, *Inside the Red Box: North Korea's Post-totalitarian Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010)

⁷For the history of the 1994 Agreed Framework signed by the United States and North Korea, see Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004). For the history of the Six Party Talks see Mike Chinoy, *Meltdown: The Inside Story of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008).

⁸"Timeline: North Korean Nuclear Negotiations," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/north-korean-nuclear-negotiations>

⁹"National Security Strategy February 2015," White House President Barack Obama, accessed June 14, 2019, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf

¹⁰Emma Chanlett-Avery, Mark Manyin, Mary Beth Nikitin, Caitlin Elizabeth Campbell and Wil Mackey, North Korea: U.S. Relations, Nuclear Diplomacy and Internal Situation," Congressional Research Service, July 27, 2018, 11-12, retrieved from the Federation of American Scientists website, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R41259.pdf>.

Kim Jong Un subsequently pursued nuclear and missile tests as part of his “Byungjin” (parallel development) policy, which aimed to develop North Korea’s economy while also strengthening the country’s defense by building nuclear weapons.¹¹ By the time Trump came into office in January 2017, analysts estimated that North Korea had enough fissile material for 13 to 21 nuclear weapons and was capable of obtaining enough for 50 to 100 weapons by 2020.¹²

Trump administration military pressure. The direction of the Trump administration’s North Korea policy was initially unclear. On the campaign trail, Trump had said that he would be willing to talk with Kim Jong Un and share a hamburger,¹³ but his messages also contained hardline elements. Shortly before taking office in January 2017, for example, he tweeted, “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won’t happen!”¹⁴ Meanwhile, the annual military exercises between the United States and South Korea—Key Resolve and Foal Eagle—began in early March and were scheduled to continue through the end of April.

The Trump administration’s position on North Korea became clear following a policy review that was completed in late March 2017. The review concluded that the Trump administration should pursue a “maximum pressure” campaign that would increase the economic costs to North Korea until complete North Korean denuclearization was achieved. The policy called for the use of secondary sanctions on Chinese companies to persuade China to pressure North Korea and stated that the administration would consider using preventive military action if nothing else worked.¹⁵

Shortly after the policy review was concluded, the United States sent a Navy strike group led by the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier to the Korean Peninsula.¹⁶ There was initially confusion about the strike group’s whereabouts, as it was spotted moving in the opposite direction of the peninsula. However, the ships did carry out training with Japan’s Self Defense Forces near Japan later that month.¹⁷

¹¹Cheon Seong-Wun, *The Kim Jong Un Regime’s “Byungjin” (Parallel Development) Policy of Economy and Nuclear Weapons and the April 1st Nuclearization Law*, Korea Institute for National Unification online series, April 23, 2013, <http://repo.kinu.or.kr/bitstream/2015.oak/2227/1/0001458456.pdf>

¹²“A Nuclear North Korea,” RAND Corporation, accessed on February 16, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/research/primers/nuclear-north-korea.html>.

¹³Nick Gass, “Trump: I’ll Meet with Kim Jong Un in the U.S.,” *POLITICO*, June 15, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/donald-trump-north-korea-nukes-224385>.

¹⁴Meghan Keneally, “From ‘Fire and Fury’ to ‘Rocket Man,’ the Various Barbs Traded Between Trump and Kim Jong Un,” ABC News, June 12, 2018, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/fire-fury-rocket-man-barbs-traded-trump-kim/story?id=53634996>

¹⁵Jackson, *On the Brink*, 104.

¹⁶Anna Fifield, U.S. Navy Sends Strike Group Toward the Korean Peninsula, *Washington Post*, April 9, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-navy-sends-strike-group-toward-korean-peninsula/2017/04/09/0c00909c-1cfd-11e7-8003-f55b4c1cfae2_story.html?utm_term=.59dcf2226169.

¹⁷Simon Denyer and Emily Rauhala, “U.S. Defense Officials May have Spoken Too Soon, but Trump’s Missing ‘Armada’ Finally Heading to Korea,” *Washington Post*, April 19, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/trumps-missing-armada-finally-heading-to-korea--and-may-stay-a-while/2017/04/19/734ac5e7-ad0c-4395-9cfe-43a9596dca7b_story.html?utm_term=.42b11a62d00a.

In the same month, NBC News reported that the United States was considering conducting a preemptive strike on North Korea if it conducted a sixth nuclear test. Quoting multiple senior intelligence officials, the report said the United States would respond to the test with conventional weapons.¹⁸ This was followed by a report in the *Guardian* that the United States was considering striking down North Korean missiles if additional missile tests were carried out.¹⁹

The following month, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visited South Korea and the demilitarized zone and declared the Obama administration's strategic patience strategy to be over.²⁰ Later that April, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said in a media interview that the United States would be open to holding direct talks with North Korea on the right agenda.²¹ But the United States did not intend to ease pressure on North Korea in the interim, as Tillerson later confirmed that the country was committed to squeezing North Korea economically.²²

In May, the United States operationalized its first Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in South Korea, with the mission to detect and destroy short- and medium-range ballistic missiles from North Korea.²³ South Korean President Moon Jae In, who came into office that same month, initially opposed the system, but he agreed to accelerate the deployment after North Korea conducted its sixth nuclear test later that year.²⁴

Despite the increasing tensions, the United States and North Korea managed to cooperate on one issue—the return of American teenager Otto Warmbier from North Korea. Warmbier, who was held in North Korea for 17 months after traveling to the country, was allowed to return to the United States after negotiations between the two countries. Warmbier, however, died shortly after returning home.²⁵

Tensions intensified in August 2017 after North Korea tested a long-range missile in late July. Trump said that North Korea would elicit “fire and fury” like it has never seen if it does not stop

¹⁸William Arkin, Cynthia McFadden and Kenzi Abou-Sabe, “U.S. May Launch Strike if North Korea Reaches for Nuclear Trigger,” *NBC News*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/u-s-may-launch-strike-if-north-korea-reaches-nuclear-n746366>.

¹⁹Spencer Ackman and Justin McCurry, “U.S. Military Considers Shooting Down Missile Tests, Sources Say,” *The Guardian*, April 18, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/18/us-military-shoot-down-north-korea-missile-tests>.

²⁰J.J. Gallagher, Alexander Mallin and Riley Biggen, “Vice President Declares End to ‘Strategic Patience’ on North Korea,” *ABC News*, April 17, 2017, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/vice-president-mike-pence-makes-surprise-visit-korean/story?id=46835615>.

²¹Michele Keleman, Trump Administration Wants North Korea at Negotiating Table on Nuclear Weapons, *NPR*, April 27, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/04/27/525866684/trump-administration-wants-north-korea-at-negotiating-table-on-nuclear-weapons>.

²²“Remarks at the United Nations Security Council Ministerial Session on the D.P.R.K.,” Department of State, April 28, 2017, <https://www.state.gov/secretary/20172018tillerson/remarks/2017/04/270544.htm>.

²³Ankit Panda, “It’s Official: THAAD Missile Defense is Up and Running in South Korea,” *The Diplomat*, May 2, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/its-official-thaad-missile-defense-is-up-and-running-in-south-korea/>.

²⁴“THAAD on the Korean Peninsula,” Institute for Security and Development Policy, October 2017, <http://isdpeu/publication/korea-thaad/>.

²⁵Sheryl Gay Stolberg, “Otto Warmbier, American Student Released from North Korea, Dies,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/us/otto-warmbier-north-korea-dies.html>.

threatening the United States.²⁶ Trump followed up the remark with a tweet saying that “military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely.”²⁷

In September, Trump called Kim Jong Un “rocket man” in a tweet after agreeing with South Korean president Moon to intensify sanctions on North Korea.²⁸ He repeated the nickname in his speech at the United Nations two days later, adding that the United States will “totally destroy” North Korea if it is forced to defend itself.²⁹ Trump also tweeted in October that Tillerson was wasting his time dealing with North Korea.³⁰ He later warned North Korea not to underestimate the United States in a speech to the South Korean parliament.³¹ Trump’s insults against Kim Jong Un continued later in the year, when he called him a “sick puppy” and “little rocket man.”³² In December, the United States was reportedly considering a “bloody nose” military attack on North Korea to signal that it was serious about stopping its nuclear and missile programs.³³

Throughout 2017, the United States held military exercises with South Korea, both to ensure preparedness against North Korea and as a demonstration of force against the country. It flew its B-1B bombers to the Korean Peninsula from Guam every month of 2017 from March onward³⁴ and also flew the B-2 stealth bomber to Guam from a base in Missouri on a mission in October.³⁵ Three B-2 stealth bombers, which would almost certainly be a part of any attack on North Korea, were deployed to Guam in January 2018.³⁶

²⁶Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun, “Trump Threatens ‘Fire and Fury’ Against North Korea if it Endangers U.S.,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/world/asia/north-korea-un-sanctions-nuclear-missile-united-nations.html>

²⁷Julia Manchester, “Trump to North Korea, U.S. ‘Locked and Loaded,’” *The Hill*, August 11, 2017, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/346155-trump-tweets-north-korea-military-solutions-fully-in-place>.

²⁸David Nakamura and Carol Morello, “In a Tweet, Trump Sticks North Korea’s Kim Jong Un with a Nick Name: ‘Rocket Man,’” *Washington Post*, September 17, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/09/17/in-a-tweet-trump-sticks-north-koreas-kim-jong-un-with-a-nickname-rocket-man/?utm_term=.0d93c40192d4.

²⁹“Remarks by President Trump to the 72nd Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” White House, September 19, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly/>.

³⁰Peter Baker and David Sanger, “Trump Says Tillerson is ‘Wasting His Time’ on North Korea,” October 1, 2017, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/01/us/politics/trump-tillerson-north-korea.html>.

³¹White House, “Remarks by President Trump to the National Assembly of the Republic of Korea,” November 7, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-national-assembly-republic-korea-seoul-republic-korea/>.

³²Saba Hamedy and Joyce Tseng, “All the Times President Trump has Insulted North Korea,” *CNN*, March 9, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/22/politics/donald-trump-north-korea-insults-timeline/index.html>.

³³Ben Riley-Smith, “Exclusive: U.S. Making Plans for ‘Bloody Nose’ Military Attack on North Korea,” *The Telegraph*, December 20, 2017, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/12/20/exclusive-us-making-plans-bloody-nose-military-attack-north/>.

³⁴Adam Mount, “U.S. B-1B Bomber Assurance Missions to Korea,” *The Federation of American Scientists*, November 6, 2017, <https://fas.org/blogs/security/2017/11/us-b-1b-bomber-assurance-missions-to-korea/> and Christine Kim and Hyonhee Shim, “B-1B Bomber Joins U.S.-South Korea Drills as Tensions Escalate,” *Reuters*, December 5, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-drill/b-1b-bomber-joins-u-s-south-korea-drills-as-tensions-escalate-idUSKBN1DZ3AA>.

³⁵Kyle Mizokami, “U.S. B-2 Bomber Exercises are a Warning to North Korea,” *Popular Mechanics*, October 31, 2017, <https://www.popularmechanics.com/military/aviation/news/a28854/two-recent-b-2-bomber-exercises-a-warning-to-north-korea/>.

³⁶Dan Lamothe, “Air Force Deployed B-2 Stealth Bombers to Guam as Sensitive Talks Involving North Korea Commenced,” January 11, 2018, *The Washington Post*,

U.S. and international sanctions. The United States also led efforts to increase economic pressure on North Korea. It spearheaded efforts to adopt U.N. Security Council resolutions imposing sanctions on the country and also applied commercial and economic penalties of its own.

The U.N. Security Council adopted four resolutions and a presidential statement during 2017 in reaction to North Korea's nuclear and missile tests.³⁷ The sanctions measures included a ban on exports of North Korean coal, a major source of income for the country, as well as a cap on North Korea's refined petroleum imports.

U.S. unilateral measures targeted a larger list of North Korean individuals and companies than the U.N. Security Council measures. Trump also issued an executive order in September that excluded any foreign individual or institution that helped trade with North Korea from the U.S. financial system.³⁸ The latter was believed to be aimed at motivating Chinese financial institutions to enforce sanctions on North Korea. In November, the United States also put North Korea back on the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism, which it was removed from in 2008.³⁹

China, which has a history of blocking harsh measures on North Korea, increasingly showed a willingness to take a tougher position against the country. In February, China announced the suspension of Chinese imports of coal to North Korea for the remainder of that year.⁴⁰ China also voted affirmatively to all four U.N. Security Council resolutions in 2017.

North Korea's relations with its neighbors in 2017. While China has traditionally protected North Korea from pressure, relations between the two countries became strained after Kim Jong Un took power in 2011. China, which values regional stability, was likely unhappy not just with North Korea's frequent missile and nuclear tests but also with the elimination of key North Korean officials who had strong relations with Beijing. This included the execution of Kim Jong Un's powerful uncle Jang Song Thaek in 2013 and the assassination of Kim's half-brother Kim Jong Nam in Malaysia in 2017.⁴¹

The two countries had few exchanges of officials in 2017. A North Korean delegation visited China and met with the Chinese Foreign Minister in March 2017,⁴² but the only other policy-

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2018/01/11/air-force-deployed-b-2-stealth-bombers-to-guam-as-sensitive-talks-involving-north-korea-commenced/?utm_term=.57c5fef6b9fd.

³⁷U.S. Department of the Treasury, "North Korea Sanctions," Resource Center, last updated on January 31, 2019, <https://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/programs/pages/nkorea.aspx>.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Michael Shear and David Sanger, "Trump Returns North Korea to List of State Sponsors of Terrorism," *New York Times*, November 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/20/us/politics/north-korea-trump-terror.html>.

⁴⁰Choe Sang-Hun, China Suspends All Coal Imports from North Korea, *New York Times*, February 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/18/world/asia/north-korea-china-coal-imports-suspended.html>.

⁴¹United States Institute of Peace Senior Study Group, *China's Role in North Korea Nuclear and Peace Negotiations* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2019), 8.

⁴²Korean Central News Agency, "DPRK FM Delegation Meets Officials of Chinese FM," March 2, 2017.

related visit took place in November, when a senior Chinese Communist Party official visited Pyongyang to try to moderate North Korea's behavior—without success.⁴³

China, worried about the rising regional tensions, called for a simultaneous freeze of U.S. and South Korean military drills and of North Korea's missile and nuclear tests in March 2017.⁴⁴ Russia joined forces with China in July 2017 and renewed that call.⁴⁵ Unlike China, Russia maintained relations with North Korea at a normal level during 2017, exchanging visits of officials and, for example, signing an extradition treaty in December.⁴⁶

Meanwhile, South Korea took steps toward rapprochement with North Korea after the progressive government under President Moon Jae In took office in May 2017. Moon extended an invitation to North Korea to attend the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea,⁴⁷ and in July, he said that he would not seek North Korean regime collapse.⁴⁸ In December, Moon also proposed that joint military exercises with the United States be postponed until after the Olympics.⁴⁹

North Korea's change in policy in early 2018. While North Korea continued with its missile and nuclear tests throughout 2017, Kim signaled the first hint of policy change by accepting the South Korean invitation to send a delegation to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics in early 2018.⁵⁰ Kim then visited China to meet with Chinese leader Xi Jinping in March—his first foreign visit since taking power in 2011—and held a summit meeting with South Korean President Moon. A summit meeting with Trump was announced after Kim's meeting with Moon.

Kim's policy became clearer in April, when he made remarks at a meeting of the ruling Worker's Party of Korea. He said that his country no longer needed to test nuclear weapons or longer-range missiles as it had obtained its goal of achieving a strategic nuclear deterrent. He also declared victory on the previous policy goal of simultaneously pursuing nuclear and economic development, adding that he was starting a "new strategic line" that focuses all efforts on economic construction.⁵¹

⁴³ Ashley Parker, "Trump Calls Chinese Envoy to North Korea Ineffectual," *Washington Post*, November 30, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2017/11/30/trump-calls-chinese-envoy-to-north-korea-ineffectual/?utm_term=.13926835cc62.

⁴⁴ "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, March 8, 2017, http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1444204.

⁴⁵ Voice of America, "Putin, Xi Call for North Korean Freeze on Missile Tests," July 4, 2017, <https://www.voanews.com/europe/putin-xi-call-north-korean-freeze-missile-tests>.

⁴⁶ Dageum Ji, "North Korea, Russia Sign New Extradition Treaty," *NK News*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.nknews.org/2017/12/north-korea-russia-sign-new-extradition-treaty-kcna/>.

⁴⁷ Yonhap News Agency, "Moon Says Sports Can Create Peace, Invites North Korea to PyeongChang Olympics," June 24, 2017, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20170624002851315/>.

⁴⁸ Hankyoreh, "In Berlin, President Moon Lays Out Vision for Inter-Korean Peace," July 7, 2017, http://english.hani.co.kr/arti/english_edition/e_northkorea/801907.html.

⁴⁹ Anna Fifield, "South Korea Asks U.S. to Delay Joint Military Drills Until After the Olympics," *Washington Post*, December 19, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/south-korea-asks-us-to-delay-joint-military-drills-until-after-the-winter-olympics/2017/12/20/71d37634-e55f-11e7-9ec2-518810e7d44d_story.html?utm_term=.04b310b6e5a8

⁵⁰ Korean Central News Agency, "Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address," January 1, 2018.

⁵¹ Korean Central News Agency, "3rd Plenary Meeting of 7th C.C., WPK Held in Presence of Kim Jong Un," April 21, 2018.

While Kim declared an end to nuclear and ICBM tests—a pledge he has adhered to as of summer 2019—he also said that the country should consolidate its achievements and “mass-produce” nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles, which the country could very well be pursuing.

Does North Korea’s strategic calculus explain the policy shift?

If we take its statements at face value, North Korea’s policy goal was to reach a technical threshold in its nuclear weapons capability, which it described as completing its “state nuclear force.” Specifically, North Korea wanted to build an ICBM capable of carrying a nuclear weapon to the U.S. mainland. By early 2017, North Korea had tested many missiles, but not an ICBM.

North Korea was both consistent and transparent about this plan. Kim began 2017 by declaring that his country was close to achieving its goal, saying that North Korea has “entered the final stage of preparation of the test launch of an ICBM.”⁵² Three weeks before North Korea test-fired its first ICBM, the *Rodong Sinmun* said in an editorial that the test-launch was “not a long way off at all” and that once North Korea achieved this threshold, U.S. hostility would become meaningless.⁵³

North Korea timed its first ICBM test with the Independence Day holiday in the United States.⁵⁴ It conducted another test of the Hwasong-14 on July 28. In its state media reports and official statements, North Korea declared that the tests showed that it could now target anywhere in the United States.⁵⁵ But North Korea did not portray the two tests of the Hwasong-14 as accomplishments of the technical goal it set for itself. Rather, it said the tests represented “a final gateway to the completion of the country’s nuclear force.”⁵⁶ Some outside analysts also pointed out that in the July tests, the missiles carried lighter payloads that allowed them to travel further than they would have had they carried the weight of nuclear weapons that North Korea likely possesses.⁵⁷

North Korea said it moved yet another step closer to attaining “the final goal of completing the state nuclear force”⁵⁸ after conducting its sixth nuclear test on September 3. Whether the test was an explosion of a hydrogen bomb as North Korea claimed was unclear, but it was the most

⁵²Korean Central News Agency, “Kim Jong Un Makes New Year Address,” January 2, 2017.

⁵³*Rodong Sinmun*, “U.S. Hostile Policy if Bound to Go Bankrupt,” June 12, 2017.

⁵⁴The *Rodong Sinmun* indicates the deliberate timing in its editorial “DPRK’s Tradition of Victory Will Last Forever” published on July 29, 2017.

⁵⁵ “DPRK Warns U.S. to Wake Up from Foolish Dream of Doing Any Harm to DPRK: FM Spokesman,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, July 30, 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/en/dprk-warns-u-s-to-wake-up-from-foolish-dream-of-doing-any-harm-to-dprk-fm-spokesman/>

⁵⁶Korean Central News Agency, “KCNA Commentary Urges U.S. to Make Responsible Option,” August 5, 2017.

⁵⁷Theodore A. Postel, Markus Schiller and Robert Schmucker, “North Korea’s ‘Not Quite’ ICBM Can’t Hit the United States,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, August 11, 2017, <https://thebulletin.org/2017/08/north-koreas-not-quite-icbm-cant-hit-the-lower-48-states/>.

⁵⁸ “FM Spokesman Denounces U.S. for Trying to Impose Additional Sanctions in DPRK,” September 5, 2017, DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/en/fm-spokesman-denounces-u-s-for-trying-to-impose-additional-sanctions-on-dprk/>.

powerful nuclear test that the country conducted, setting off an earthquake of 6.3 magnitude.⁵⁹ North Korea said the event proved that the country could produce powerful nuclear weapons that were small enough and light enough to put on an ICBM.⁶⁰ To underscore what it considered a success, North Korea released photographs of Kim with what it claimed was a thermonuclear weapon meant for an ICBM.⁶¹

It was only after its third ICBM test of 2017 that North Korea declared its goal achieved. The November 28 test of the Hwasong-15, North Korea's largest and longest-reaching missile, prompted Kim to conclude that his country "finally realized the great historic cause of completing the state nuclear force."⁶²

Whether North Korea truly cleared all the technical hurdles to developing an ICBM that can carry a nuclear weapon to the U.S. mainland remains uncertain. Some experts question whether the country has developed a reentry vehicle that can shield the warhead from the high temperatures and stress of reentry into the atmosphere.⁶³ Nevertheless, North Korean statements paint a picture of a country that obtained its security objectives first, and then shifted to diplomacy.

Do U.S. threats and military pressure explain the policy shift?

North Korea was under unprecedented economic and political pressure in 2017, including verbal threats from the U.S. president and frequent overflights of U.S. bombers. Did this pressure have no impact on North Korean behavior?

North Korean statements in 2017 indicate that the country was deeply concerned about such threats. North Korea has a long history of responding to pressure with pressure and using bombastic language to counter any perceived threats or insults to the country. While North Korean behavior followed this pattern in 2017, two factors stand out about its responses and demonstrate the seriousness with which it took the threats.

The first was the specificity with which North Korea responded to U.S. military threats. The Korean People's Army (KPA) issued a warning against Guam on August 8 that it was "carefully examining the operational plan" that would make "an enveloping fire at the areas around Guam

⁵⁹David E. Sanger and Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Nuclear Test Draws U.S. Warning of 'Massive Military Response,'" *New York Times*, September 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/03/world/asia/north-korea-tremor-possible-6th-nuclear-test.html>

⁶⁰"DPRK Nuclear Weapons Institute on Successful Test of H-Bomb for ICBM," DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, September 3, 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/en/dprk-nuclear-weapons-institute-on-successful-test-of-h-bomb-for-icbm/>.

⁶¹Brad Lendon and Taehoon Lee, "North Korea Says It Can Make New Bomb in Volume," *CNN*, September 3, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/09/02/asia/north-korea-kim-jong-un-nuke-lab-visit/index.html>

⁶²*Rodong Sinmun*, "DPRK Government Statement on Successful Test-fire of New-Type ICBM," November 29, 2017.

⁶³For example, see, Michael Elleman, "North Korea's Third ICBM Launch," *38 North*, November 29, 2017, <https://www.38north.org/2017/11/melleman112917/>.

with medium-to-long-range strategic ballistic” missiles.⁶⁴ The KPA said this plan was in response to U.S. military exercises on the Korean peninsula involving Guam-based U.S. bombers, as well as to U.S. ICBM tests in California. After Trump threatened North Korea with “fire and fury” on August 8, a KPA general further specified how the missiles would travel to Guam, adding that the military would report the plan to Kim for a decision on whether to carry it out.⁶⁵

Another difference was the level of authority from which some of the comments were made. In response to Trump’s remarks in his September 19 U.N. speech, in which he called Kim a “rocket man,” Kim himself issued an unprecedented statement on September 21 calling Trump’s behavior “mentally deranged” and threatening the “highest level of hardline countermeasure in history.”⁶⁶ Given that North Korea views insults to the country’s leadership as a grave offense and that the comments were made by the U.S. president, it is unsurprising that they triggered a strong reaction. Still, the fact that Kim himself issued a statement and that it was issued two days after the speech is evidence of North Korea’s level of concern.

Throughout the year, North Korea also publicly complained about other aspects of what it called U.S. hostile policy. It was perturbed by the perceived threat from U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises and by senior officials’ comments, including Pompeo’s July remarks that implied the goal of removing North Korean leadership.⁶⁷

While U.S. pressure did not stop North Korea from conducting missile and nuclear tests, it is possible that it affected the pace of North Korean nuclear development. In other words, North Korea could have sped up its plan to achieve its security goal as it faced increased pressure. Indeed, North Korea test-launched two Hwasong-14 ICBMs only two months after the first successful launch of the intermediate-range Hwasong-12 using the same type of engine, followed by the test-firing of the Hwasong-15 ICBM four months later.⁶⁸

U.S. threats and military pressure may also have affected North Korea’s decision in another way. After it successfully flight-tested the Hwasong-15 ICBM, North Korea declared that it credibly demonstrated a capability to target the continental United States with a nuclear-armed ballistic missile and stopped further tests. Some nuclear and missile scholars questioned whether North Korea truly obtained this capability. Former Los Alamos National Laboratory Director Siegfried Hecker, for instance, said he thought North Korea needed at least two more years and several more nuclear and missile tests to reach its goal.⁶⁹ Michael Elleman, a Senior Fellow for Missile Defense at the International Institute for Strategic Studies, claimed that without extensive flight

⁶⁴*Rodong Sinmun*, “U.S. Should be Prudent Under Present Acute Situation: Spokesman for KPA Strategic Force,” August 10, 2017.

⁶⁵*Rodong Sinmun*, “KPA Will Take Practical Action: Commander of Strategic Force,” August 11, 2017.

⁶⁶Ryugyong, “Statement of Chairman of State Affairs Commission of DPRK,” September 21, 2017.

⁶⁷“DPRK FM Spokesman Slams U.S. CIA Director’s Remarks,” DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, July 25, 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/en/dprk-fm-spokesman-slams-u-s-cia-directors-remarks/>.

⁶⁸Michael Elleman, “The Secret to North Korea’s ICBM Success,” *Survival*, 59:5 (2017): 25-26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2017.1375218>.

⁶⁹Siegfried Hecker, “What We Really Know about North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/north-korea/2017-12-04/what-we-really-know-about-north-koreas-nuclear-weapons>.

testing, North Korea cannot have high confidence about its missiles' performance under operational conditions.⁷⁰

If the skeptics are correct, North Korea could have declared that its nuclear force was complete despite doubts about its capability and stopped further tests because it thought the tests were too risky given U.S. military threats. The international pressure, in other words, could have forced North Korea to prematurely declare its nuclear deterrent complete.

Whether North Korea declared the success of its security goal prematurely ultimately depends on what its goal was. Experts doubt that North Korea has an ICBM capability that would perform well under different operational conditions, but perhaps this wasn't North Korea's goal. Even without an operationally viable ICBM capability, North Korea gains politically and strategically. The appearance of the capability would help North Korea to not only deter the United States from attacking the country but also lower U.S. incentives to come to the aid of South Korea and Japan. In other words, North Korea's nuclear achievements could allow it to threaten South Korea and Japan while preventing U.S. nuclear retaliation by holding U.S. cities hostage.

Do U.S. and international sanctions explain the shift?

North Korea was also likely concerned about the impact of U.N. and U.S. sanctions, which reached an unprecedented level in 2017, as well. It repeatedly complained about the adverse economic impact of the sanctions, which was uncharacteristic for a country that tells its public that the country is resilient because of its self-supporting economy. For example, the Foreign Ministry issued a statement on June 16 criticizing the severe restrictions on coal exports and prohibition of imports of dual-use items, saying that they are "having adverse consequences for the people's livelihood."⁷¹ The country also established a Sanctions Damage Investigation Committee in 2017 to assess the impact of the international measures. The committee issued a number of statements criticizing the sanctions saying that they resulted in delivery delays for ordinary daily consumer goods and medical equipment such as x-ray machines.⁷² The spokesperson of a sports committee also complained in the same month that sanctions prevented the import of sports equipment and the hosting of international competitions.⁷³

In another unusual move, North Korea directed criticism at China, which increased its support for sanctions against North Korea from 2016 onward. For example, a May 4, 2017 KCNA commentary said China "should no longer test the limits of" North Korea's patience.⁷⁴ In

⁷⁰Michael Elleman, "Why a Formal End to North Korean Missile Test Makes Sense," *38 North*, February 26, 2019, <https://www.38north.org/2019/02/melleman022619/>.

⁷¹DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Press Statement of DPRK Foreign Ministry," June 16, 2017, <http://www.mfa.gov.kp/en/press-statement-of-dprk-foreign-ministry/>.

⁷²Korean Central News Agency, "DPRK Will Settle Damage Incurred by Sanctions of U.S. and Its Followers," October 20, 2017.

⁷³*Rodong Sinmun*, "Spokesperson of NSGC of DPRK Slams U.S. Despicable Sanctions," October 28, 2017.

⁷⁴Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korean Media, in Rare Critique of China, Says Nuclear Program Will Continue," *New York Times*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/04/world/asia/north-korea-nuclear-weapons-china.html>.

September, the *Rodong Sinmun* lashed out at two Chinese papers for criticizing North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons and justifying U.N. sanctions against the country.⁷⁵

North Korea was, however, careful to say that it would ultimately prevail despite the sanctions, and that the sanctions themselves were part of an unjustified pressure campaign orchestrated by the United States. For example, a November 6 *Rodong Sinmun* editorial said that the country "gained everything" despite "decades-long sanctions and pressure" from the United States and that they will "never work" on the country.⁷⁶

More importantly, North Korea never put its economic interests ahead of its security. An episode that took place after North Korea's first Hwasong-14 ICBM test in early July illustrates this point. After the launch, Russia refused to call the tested missile an ICBM at the U.N. Security Council, complicating U.S. efforts to sanction North Korea accordingly.⁷⁷ If economic interests were important, North Korea could have supported Russia's position or at least remained silent. Instead, North Korea issued a statement criticizing Russia for questioning North Korea's ICBM capability.⁷⁸

North Korea was clearly irritated by the sanctions and felt economic pain from the measures. Yet, as in the case of military pressure, if sanctions played into the country's decision-making, it only served as motivation to speed up its efforts to reach its security goal, even if it meant declaring that it achieved that goal prematurely.

Do diplomatic overtures by China, South Korea, and Russia explain the policy shift?

North Korea took the unusual step of openly criticizing China in 2017 and did not respond positively to China's outreach in November when a senior Chinese Communist Party official visited the country.⁷⁹ While it maintained diplomatic contacts with Russia through an exchange of visits, it ignored South Korea's diplomatic overtures completely until it achieved its security goal. North Korea made an abrupt shift and responded positively to South Korea's invitation for the country to send a delegation to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics only after this point.

China and Russia's "freeze-for-freeze" proposal in 2017 did not prompt North Korea to change its course from confrontation to diplomacy immediately, but could have impacted North Korea's calculations on how to reduce tensions. Kim Jong Un declared a halt to nuclear and missile tests in April 2018 and after the first U.S.-North Korea summit in June 2018, Trump announced a suspension of large-scale military drills between the United States and South Korea.

⁷⁵ *Rodong Sinmun*, "Chinese Media's Shameless and Impudent Acts," September 23, 2017.

⁷⁶ Ri Hak Nam, "Nonsense of Haley Mad on Confrontation," *Rodong Sinmun*, November 6, 2017.

⁷⁷ Michelle Nichols, "Russia, U.S. Duel at U.N. Over Whether North Korea Fired Long-Range Missile," Reuters, July 11, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missile-un-idUSKBN1A50AA>.

⁷⁸ Korean Central News Agency, "Is Russia Sightless or is it Mimicking Blind: Researcher of Institute for International Studies," August 9, 2017.

⁷⁹ Parker, "Trump Calls Chinese Envoy to North Korea Ineffectual," November 30, 2017.

Conclusion and policy recommendations

North Korea's policy shift to diplomacy took place only after it reached its security goal, which it defined as completing its state nuclear force. It stuck to this plan despite military pressure from the United States that included verbal threats from Trump, overflights of U.S. bombers, and U.S. threats to attack the country. Though the U.N. and U.S. economic sanctions were causing pain, that did not stop the country from pursuing its nuclear development plans either.

As discussed above, North Korea could have accelerated its plan to achieve its security goal because of the unprecedented pressure. This pressure may also have prompted North Korea to prematurely declare that it had a capability to strike the U.S. mainland with nuclear-armed missiles, although that depends on whether North Korea was aiming to build an operational system or was satisfied with the political and strategic gains from an appearance of having such a capability.

This study demonstrates that U.S. military threats and the U.S.-led economic sanctions campaign failed to achieve their intended outcome. The pressure campaigns were supposed to squeeze North Korea until it changed its view that nuclear weapons guaranteed the country's security and convince the country to give them up. Instead, North Korea appears to have endured the pressure, and adhered to its plan to build its "state nuclear force." If anything, the U.S. pressure sped up North Korea's nuclear development efforts—the opposite of what it intended to achieve.

These findings underscore important lessons for policy makers. For military or economic pressure to achieve their intended outcomes, policy makers need to pay close attention to the target country's policy priorities and realistically anticipate how the pressure could affect its intentions and behavior. If pressure is to be applied, it should be matched with achievable, specific goals rather than large, abstract goals such as denuclearization. The impact of the pressure should also be assessed frequently against those specific goals to see whether it is achieving the intended outcome. Throughout 2017, North Korea prioritized its security interests and believed it could better protect itself if it built what it considered an adequate nuclear deterrent. U.S. military threats—particularly absent accompanying positive inducements—probably increased North Korea's determination to achieve its goal.

North Korea is continuing to pursue diplomacy in summer of 2019, but is showing signs of hardening its position. While North Korea has kept its promise to refrain from tests of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, it has fired short-range ballistic missiles in May and July, portraying them as a warning against U.S. and South Korean military exercises. North Korea has also given a year-end deadline for the United States to change its position of demanding denuclearization upfront.

If the United States is to reduce North Korea's nuclear and missile threat through diplomacy, it should pay closer attention to North Korean policy objectives and take achievable, specific steps toward that goal. If pressure is to be used as a tool, its goals need to be clarified with North Korean policy priorities in mind, and assessed frequently for its impact. Doing so would raise the likelihood of achieving the intended outcome.

About the author

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Appendix

Actions, Comments by United States and North Korea January 2017-January 2018

	United States	North Korea	Other countries
January 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • January 2: Donald Trump tweets, “North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the U.S. It won’t happen!” • January 19: Trump takes office as U.S. president 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • January 1: Kim Jong Un says North Korea is in the final stages of preparations for test-launching an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) 	
February 2017		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • February 12: Launches a KN-15 (Pukguksong-2), a road-mobile medium-range ballistic missile (MRBM) • February 13: Kim Jong Un’s older half-brother Kim Jong Nam killed in Malaysia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feb. 18: China announces suspension of Chinese imports of coal from North Korea for the rest of 2017
March 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 1: Begins Foal Eagle annual joint military exercises with South Korea • March 17: Secretary of State Tillerson says all options are on the table regarding North Korea • March 17: Trump tweets that North Korea “is behaving very badly. They have been ‘playing’ the United States for years. China has done little to help!” • March 21: Flies a B-1B bomber to Japan and South Korea for exercises • End of March: Administration completes policy review, concludes on pursuing “maximum pressure” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 6: Launches four extended-range Scud missiles, observed by Kim Jong Un • March 22: Launches a ballistic missile (type unknown) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • March 3: Chinese Foreign Minister meets North Korea Foreign Ministry delegation • March 8: Chinese Foreign Minister advocates “freeze-for-freeze” de-escalation measure for North Korea
April 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April 6-7: Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping meet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April 6: Foreign Ministry issues a memorandum 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April 6: US attacks Syria over its use of chemical weapons • Early April: USS Carl Vinson heads north from Singapore, trains in sea near Japan with SDF • April 11: Trump tweets, “North Korea is looking for trouble. If China decides to help, that would be great. If not, we will solve the problem without them!” • April 13: Trump tweets, “I have great confidence that China will properly deal with North Korea. If they are unable to do so, the U.S., with its allies, will!” • April 16: Mike Pence visits DMZ • April 17: Holds military exercise Max Thunder until April 28 • April 24: Trump tells UNSC ambassadors stronger sanctions are needed to deal with North Korea • April 28: Trump tweets, “North Korea disrespected the wishes of China & its highly respected President when it launched, though unsuccessfully, a missile today. Bad!” • April 30: Trump calls Kim Jong Un a “pretty smart cookie” in interview with CBS 	<p>criticizing US military exercises, dispatching of USS Carl Vinson and B-1B bombers</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • April 5: Launches a Hwasong-12 IRBM • April 16: Launches a Hwasong-12 IRBM • April 18: North Korean Vice Minister Han Song Ryol warns that an “all-out war” would result if the United States was “reckless enough to use military means” • April 26: Foreign Ministry spokesman complains about U.S. attempt to convene a UNSC meeting on the denuclearization of North Korea • April 27: North Korea’s permanent mission accuses UNSC of becoming a political tool of the US, Foreign Ministry says pressure will not work on North Korea • April 29: Launches a Hwasong-12 IRBM • Late April: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i> calls USS Carl Vinson’s exercises, US air drills with allies as reckless provocation in articles 	
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<p>May 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May 2: THAAD becomes operational in South Korea • May 4: US House of Representatives passes sanctions act against North Korea • May 29-30: 2 B-1Bs fly to Korean Peninsula for exercises • May 29: Trump tweets, “North Korea has shown great disrespect for their neighbor, China, by shooting off yet another ballistic missile ... but China is trying hard!” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May 3: KCNA commentary makes rare direct complaint about China • May 13: Supreme People’s Assembly condemns U.S. House of Representatives sanctions act against North Korea • May 14: Launches a Hwasong-12 IRBM • May 15: Committee on terrorism complains about an alleged CIA plot to eliminate North Korean leadership • May 21: Launches a KN-15 (Pukguksong-2) MRBM • May 28: Launches a KN-18 Scud-variant • May 30: North Korea’s Permanent Mission complains about the legal ground of UNSC’s sanctions resolutions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May 10: Moon Jae In takes office in South Korea
<p>June 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 2: Supports UNSC resolution 2356 responding to North Korea’s ballistic missile tests • June 2: Blacklists entities linked to North Korean nuclear and missile tests • June 12: Delegation visits Pyongyang to discuss evacuation of Otto Warmbier, secures his return on June 13 • June 8: Flies B-1B bombers to the Korean Peninsula 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 3: Korean People’s Army (KPA) calls US test of missile defense system a military provocation that would ignite a nuclear war • June 7: Launches four Kumsong-3 anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM) • June 12: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i> article says North Korea’s ICBM test is “not a long way off at all” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 24: Moon Jae In invites North Korea to the Pyeongchang Winter Olympics

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 20: Flies B-1B bombers for exercises with Japanese, South Korean forces • June 20: Trump tweets, “The U.S. once again condemns the brutality of the North Korean regime as we mourn its latest victim.” • June 30: Trump tweets, “The era of strategic patience with the North Korea regime has failed. That patience is over.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • June 13: Allows the return of Otto Warmbier to the United States • June 16: Foreign Ministry says sanctions affecting people’s lives negatively • June 20-22: KCNA, <i>Rodong Sinmun</i> articles complain about THAAD in South Korea • June 22: KCNA article complains about B-1B flights • June 23: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i> article calls Trump a lunatic 	
July 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • July 3: Trump tweets, “North Korea has just launched another missile. Does this guy have anything better to do with his life?” • July 6-7: Flies 2 B-1B bombers from Guam for exercises with Japanese, South Korean counterparts in 1st night training run • July 8-9: B-1B bombers engage in practice bombing • July 20: CIA Director Mike Pompeo indicates desire for Kim Jong Un’s ouster at the Aspen Security Forum. • July 28-29: Flies 2 B-1B bombers from Guam to Korean Peninsula in response to North Korean ICBM tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • July 4: Launches a Hwasong-14 ICBM • July 25: Foreign Ministry spokesman says U.S. policy is regime change • July 28: Launches a Hwasong-14 ICBM, observed by Kim Jong Un 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • July 4: Russia joins China’s call for “freeze-for-freeze” de-escalation measure • July 7: Moon Jae In lays out vision for inter-Korean Peace
August 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 2: Trump signs the Countering American Adversaries Through Sanctions Act into law targeting Iran, Russia and North Korea • August 2: Announces travel ban to North Korea 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 1: Foreign Ministry spokesman says U.S. sanctions bill targeting Iran, Russia and North Korea faces international backlash 	

	<p>by U.S. passport holders from September 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 5: Supports UNSC resolution 2371 in response to North Korea’s July missile tests • August 5: Trump tweets, “The United Nations Security Council just voted 15-0 to sanction North Korea. China and Russia voted with us. Very big financial impact!” • August 5: Trump tweets, “United Nations Resolution is the single largest economic sanctions package ever on North Korea. Over one billion dollars in cost to N.K.” • August 6: Trump tweets, “Just completed call with President Moon of South Korea. Very happy and impressed with 15-0 United Nations vote on North Korea sanctions.” • August 7: Flies 2 B-1B bombers to the Korean Peninsula • August 8: Trump tweets, “After many years of failure, countries are coming together to finally address the dangers posed by North Korea. We must be tough & decisive!” • August 8: Trump threatens North Korea with “fire and fury” • August 11: Trump tweets, “Military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely. Hopefully Kim Jong Un will find another path!” • August 16: Trump tweets, “Kim Jong Un of North Korea made a very wise and well-reasoned 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 3: Foreign Ministry spokesman says U.S. sanctions laws will not work on North Korea • August 4: Foreign Ministry spokesman calls US travel ban a “childish measure” • August 7: Government statement rejects UNSC sanctions saying nuclear deterrent will never be on the negotiating table as long as U.S. hostile policy continues • August 8: KPA Strategic Force spokesman says carefully examining operational plan for attacking Guam • August 9: KPA Strategic Force Commander details plan of attack on Guam, says plan will be completed in mid-August and will be presented to Kim Jong Un • August 10: KPA General Staff spokesman says KPA will respond with a preemptive retaliatory operation if any sign of a U.S. “beheading operation” • August 16: Kim Jong Un inspects the Command of the Strategic Force of the KPA • August 25: Conducts short-range missile tests 	
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	<p>decision. The alternative would have been both catastrophic and unacceptable”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 21: Begins annual Ulchi-Guardian Freedom military exercises with South Korea • August 29: Supports UNSC presidential statement condemning the Hwasong-12 test • August 30: Trump tweets, “The U.S. has been talking to North Korea, and paying them extortion money, for 25 years. Talking is not the answer!” • August 30: Flies 2 B-1B bombers together with the Marine Corp’s F-35B fighter aircraft for first time to the Korean Peninsula in response to the August 28 IRBM launch 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • August 26: Launches three KN-21 Scud variant SRBMs • August 28: Launches a Hwasong-12 IRBM • Late August: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i>, KPA spokesman of the Panmunjon mission, North Korean mission to the U.N. complain about U.S. military exercises • August 29: KCNA says Trump a “source of headache at home and abroad” • August 30: Kim Jong Un guides a ballistic missile launching drill • August 31: Foreign Ministry spokesman rejects UNSC presidential statement 	
<p>September 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • September 3: Trump tweets, “South Korea is finding, as I have told them, that their talk of appeasement with North Korea will not work, they only understand one thing!” September 3: Trump tweets, “The United States is considering, in addition to other options, stopping all trade with any country doing business with North Korea” • September 19: Trump calls Kim Jong Un “rocket man” in UN speech • September 11: Supports UNSC resolution 2375 imposing additional sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • September 3: Conducts sixth nuclear test, claims it was a hydrogen bomb • September 5: Foreign Ministry spokesman denounces U.S. efforts to impose additional sanctions • September 8: KCNA criticizes US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley for her comments • September 9: North Korean permanent mission to the UN rejects UNSC presidential statement against 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • September 15: Supports UNSC press statement condemning North Korea for missile launches • September 17: Trump tweets, “I spoke with President Moon of South Korea last night. Asked him how Rocket Man is doing. Long gas lines forming in North Korea. Too bad!” • September 17: Flies B1-B bombers with Japanese, South Korean counterparts in reaction to North Korean missile tests • September 21: Trump issues an executive order for further sanctions on North Korea • September 22: Trump tweets, “Kim Jong Un of North Korea, who is obviously a madman who doesn’t mind starving or killing his people, will be tested like never before!” • September 23: Trump tweets, “Just heard Foreign Minister of North Korea speak at U.N. If he echoes thoughts of Little Rocket Man, they won’t be around much longer • September 22: Trump calls Kim Jong Un “rocket man” again at a rally in Alabama • September 23: Flies B-1B bombers in international airspace over waters east of North Korea, the farthest north of the demilitarized zone that a U.S. fighter or bomber aircraft had flown off the North Korean coast in the 21st century 	<p>ballistic missile launches</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • September 11: Releases photograph of Kim Jong Un with what North Korea called thermonuclear weapon • September 13: Foreign Ministry rejects UNSC resolution • September 14: Launches a Hwasong-12 IRBM • September 22: Kim Jong Un responds to Trump’s UN remarks by calling him a “mentally deranged dotard” • September 23: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i> calls Trump a “mentally deranged hooligan” • September 23: Foreign Minister Ri Yong Ho reacts to Trump speech, says insulting the supreme dignity of his country make “rockets’ visit to the entire U.S. mainland inevitable all the more” • September 23: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i> makes unusual complaint about Chinese media 	
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<p>October 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • October 9: Trump tweets, “Our country has been unsuccessfully dealing with North Korea for 25 years, giving billions of dollars & getting nothing. Policy didn’t work” • October 10: Flies 2 B-1B bombers for night time training with Japanese, South Korean forces in Sea of Japan • October 21: Flies 2 B-1B bombers to South Korea for an air show visit • October 28: Flies a B-2 bomber on a mission from Missouri to Guam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • October 9: KCNA says sanctions are an act of war • October 8: Kim Jong Un says nuclear weapons are “a treasured sword of justice” for his country • October 12: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i> says nothing can stop North Korea from achieving “the state nuclear force” • October 20: National Peace Committee of Korea spokesman says US military reported military options against North Korea to Trump, including a decapitation plan • October 20: KCNA complains about US nuclear modernization • October 20: Sanctions Damage Investigation Committee says sanctions aimed at bringing about humanitarian disaster • October 30: KCNA criticizes US military exercises • Late October: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i>, KCNA react to Trump’s comments against North Korea 	
<p>November 2017</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • November 2: Flies 2 B-1B bombers to the Korean Peninsula from Guam • November 4: Washington Post reports on Pentagon assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • November 4: <i>Rodong Sinmun</i> complains about US B-1B bomber flights, calling it a nuclear strike drill 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • November 17-20: Chinese Communist Party official Song Tao visits North Korea

	<p>that ground invasion would be necessary to locate and secure North Korean nuclear sites</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • November 7: Trump tweets, “The North Korean regime has pursued its nuclear & ballistic missile programs in defiance of every assurance, agreement, & commitment it has made to the U.S. and its allies” • November 7: Trump warns Kim Jong Un not to underestimate the US in comments at the South Korean parliament • November 11: Trump tweets, “Why would Kim Jong-un insult me by calling me ‘old,’ when I would NEVER call him ‘short and fat?’” • November 20: Trump returns North Korea to US list of state sponsors of terrorism • November 28: Trump calls Kim Jong Un a “sick puppy” in a speech in Missouri. • November 29: Trump tweets, “Just spoke to President XI JINPING of China concerning the provocative actions of North Korea. Additional major sanctions will be imposed on North Korea today. This situation will be handled!” • November 30: Trump tweets, “The Chinese Envoy, who just returned from North Korea, seems to have had no impact on Little Rocket Man. Hard to believe his people, and the military, put up with living in such horrible conditions” 	<p>against North Korea</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • November 5: UN mission calls UN sanctions a human rights violation • November 13: Foreign Ministry spokesman calls Trump’s visit to South Korea a “business trip by a warmonger to enrich the monopolies of the US defense industry” • November 18: KCNA reacts to November 4 Washington Post story, says it will be the repeat of the Korean War • November 24: Foreign Ministry spokesman calls U.S. relisting of North Korea as state sponsor of terror "a serious provocation and a violent infringement upon our dignified country” • November 28: Foreign Ministry scholar says North Korean nuclear force is meant to prevent nuclear war, not random attacks on U.S. and Asia • November 28: Launches a Hwasong-15 ICBM, Kim Jong Un announces that North Korea has completed its nuclear force 	
December 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • December 6: Flies a B-1B bomber from Guam 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • December 5: Foreign Ministry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • December 2: Russian State Duma

	<p>as part of aerial exercise with South Korea</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • December 20: Telegraph reports US may be thinking about a “bloody nose” attack • December 22: Supports UNSC resolution 2397, which imposes additional sanctions on North Korea • December 28: Trump tweets, “Caught RED HANDED – very disappointed that China is allowing oil to go into North Korea. There will never be a friendly solution to the North Korea problem if this continues to happen!” 	<p>spokesman complains about US-South Korea aerial drill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • December 6: Foreign Ministry spokesman again complains about the military exercises as well as U.S. comments about North Korea • December 16: Foreign Ministry spokesman says U.S. seeking sea blockade against North Korea • December 22: Kim Jong Un repeats that his country “realized the historic cause of completing the state nuclear force” • December 26: Foreign Ministry spokesman calls UNSC resolution 2397 a U.S. scheme and an infringement on the sovereignty of North Korea 	<p>delegation visits North Korea</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • December 7: North Korea and Russia sign extradition treaty • December 16: Russian defense delegation visits North Korea • December 19: South Korea asks US to delay joint military drills until after the Pyeongchang Olympics
<p>January 2018</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early January: US deploys three stealth B-2 Spirit bombers to Guam • January 2: Trump tweets, “North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the ‘Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.’ Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works!” • January 2: Trump tweets, “Sanctions and ‘other’ pressures are beginning to have a big 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • January 1: Kim Jong Un says North Korea will mass produce nuclear warheads and ballistic missiles and accepts South Korea’s invitation to send a delegation to the Pyeongchang Olympics • January 23: KCNA says ICBM test-firing will “not be ‘fireworks’ for the Olympics” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •

	<p>impact on North Korea. Solders are dangerously fleeing South Korea. Rocket man now wants to talk to South Korea for first time. Perhaps that is good news, perhaps not – we will see!”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• January 30: Trump mentions North Korea in his State of the Union address		
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