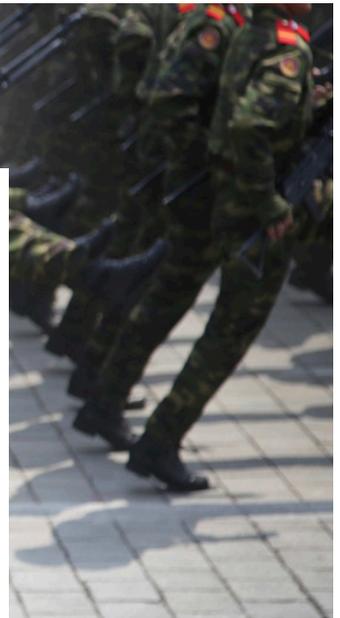




AP Photo/Wong Maye-E, File

In this April 15, 2017, file photo, soldiers goose-step across Kim Il Sung Square in Pyongyang, North Korea, during a parade to celebrate the 105th birth anniversary of Kim Il Sung, the country's late founder and grandfather of current ruler Kim Jong Un. The message of the parade is clear: North Korea is, or is near to being, able to launch a pre-emptive strike against a regional target. It is preparing to withstand a retaliatory follow-up attack if it does, and it is building the arsenal it needs to then launch a second wave of strikes, this time at the U.S. mainland.



 **JOURNAL ARTICLE** – *Foreign Policy*

‘No Good Options’ on North Korea Is a Myth

Author: [William H. Tobey](#) | July 07, 2017

It is now a commonplace to argue that there are no good options on North Korea — common perhaps, but wrong. In fact, it is Pyongyang that faces militarily and economically dominant adversaries, and dim prospects for long-term success. To be sure, the threat posed by North Korea’s growing nuclear and ballistic missile arsenals is changing in kind as well as magnitude and will require responses, but some perspective is warranted. Japan, South Korea, and the United States are more than capable of meeting that threat and deterring a catastrophic attack from the North.

Whether by nuclear or conventional means, general war against the United States and its allies would mean the end of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un's rule. He and his accomplices would be unlikely to survive such a conflict and would be displaced by it in any event. Because regime preservation is the North's paramount strategic objective, Kim can be deterred from starting such a war.

It is also often said that there is no military solution to the North Korean conundrum. The costs would be far too great to try to resolve the North Korean problem through force.

An often-asserted corollary — that because there is no viable military option, diplomacy is the only solution — is dubious, and so far, flat wrong. Four U.S. presidents prior to the current one — two Democrats and two Republicans — undertook serious diplomatic efforts with the North. They all failed. In the nuclear realm alone, North Korea has violated the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons, its 1992 safeguards agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency, the 1992 North-South denuclearization agreement, and the 1994 Agreed Framework, along with subsequent political understandings, such as the September 2005 Joint Statement and the 2012 “Leap Day” agreement. The 2012 North Korean constitution declares the North to be a nuclear state. There may be reasons to talk to Pyongyang, but as long as the Kim regime remains in power, negotiating denuclearization is not credibly one of them.

So if neither military nor diplomatic means are viable, are there no good options? The North can be deterred from launching a major attack, as it has been for over six decades, by the threat of an overwhelming response. Moreover, as the economic divergence between the prosperous South (the only country in the last 20 years to join the ranks of the developed world) and the pitiable North (where squalor pervades) continues to grow, so too will eventually irresistible pressures for change. Skeptics answer that we have hoped for decades that the North would collapse, but remain disappointed. The same was said of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. Moreover, as we bide our time, it is the North that suffers, not the United States or its allies. In the meantime, there are several concrete steps we must take

to defend ourselves from the attacks that are emanating from the North, or might emerge in the future.

We need both better cyber defenses and an offensive strategy that will deter attacks and respond to North Korean assaults, exacting retribution for cases like the Sony hack. We should increase monitoring and interdiction efforts to guard against the possibility that North Korea could export part of its growing stocks of fissile material and nuclear weapons — for example, requiring inspection of North Korean aircraft and ships seeking to transit sovereign airspace or waters. Missile defenses against both theater and long-range systems should be further improved. We should more vigorously sanction Pyongyang’s proliferation and illicit activities, including selective secondary sanctions on Chinese entities. Here, the efforts against Iran’s nuclear program provide a model. Seoul should consider deploying a system akin to Israel’s Iron Dome defense against artillery and rocket forces, especially one based on advanced technologies like laser weapons. In sum, the United States should seek to contain North Korea tightly until peaceful reunification and denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula becomes possible. All of this is best done in cooperation with allies and other nations.

Fear is an understandable reaction to North Korea’s progress on nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles, but it clouds judgment and increases tolerances for risk. Winston Churchill said, “Fear is a reaction. Courage is a decision.” It is time to take decisions that will ease our fears and boost our courage. Time was on North Korea’s side as it worked toward nuclear weapons, but paradoxically, now that Pyongyang has them, it no longer is. There are good options for responding to the North Korean threat that do not entail war. It is time to implement them.

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