

## Ask an Expert: Dr. Jim Walsh on the North Korean Nuclear Threat



In this interview, Center contributor Dr. Jim Walsh analyzes the threat that North Korea's nuclear weapons program poses to the U.S. and its allies, offers options for a U.S. response, and proposes recommendations to increase the effectiveness of U.S. engagement with South Korea, Japan, China and North Korea to eventually realize the goal of North Korean denuclearization.

Dr. Jim Walsh is an expert in international security and, in particular, topics involving nuclear weapons, the Middle East, and East Asia. He is a Research Associate at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Security Studies Program. Walsh has traveled to North Korea for talks with officials about nuclear issues, and has interviewed North Korean defectors on the effectiveness of sanctions. His expertise on nuclear non-proliferation issues is widely sought, and he has made frequent appearances in the media and before the United States Senate and House of Representatives.

*Background: North Korea has accelerated its nuclear weapons activity this year, conducting its fourth and fifth nuclear weapons tests and 21 ballistic missile tests to date in 2016. North Korea's pursuit of a credible nuclear deterrent, and the United States response, will be a key development throughout Donald Trump's presidency.*

1. **North Korea is a remarkably opaque country, but do you have any theories on what has been driving North Korea's nuclear activity this year?**

**JW:** You're right to say it's opaque; it's the most opaque country in the world. We have more theories than facts, and my guess is there is no one single variable that drives this. It's probably a combination of different things. Part of it, it's pretty clear in meetings with North Koreans and in their public statements they are very much trying to establish the notion that they are a nuclear weapons state; people just have to deal with that.

They are simultaneously seeming to want to encourage negotiations, but negotiations that recognize them as a nuclear power. One might think that the added tests are supposed to both bolster the quality of their arsenal but also send the political message that there is no turning back, something that [Director of National Intelligence Clapper seemed to say](#) the other day.

It may also have to do with domestic politics, signals that you send to your own population, it may just have to do with chairman Kim, the young leader of North Korea. Certainly the tempo of tests, missile and nuclear, have changed dramatically since he has assumed office. He is not his father so there may be something about the young leader himself that factors in here, but unfortunately it's very hard to judge North Korean intentions. We are pretty much left with judging and interpreting their actions.

2. **How would you evaluate the threat that North Korea's nuclear program poses to the United States and its allies?**

**JW:** It is a threat; all nuclear weapons are a threat, regardless of who owns them. They are a threat to the populations in the countries that are nuclear weapons states, as well as to others who might be threatened.

The American perspective on this tends to be a little odd. Our focus seems to have been, well the real threat is when North Korea can build a ICBM (which I think they are far away from), that could deliver a nuclear ICBM to the U.S. homeland. That seems to get it almost exactly wrong. It's both too soon and too late to have that be the threshold.

As it stands, North Korea could now build a simple gun-type device, drop it from a plane, that's what all first-generation nuclear weapons states have done for their delivery systems, and hit U.S. personnel, tens of thousands of American men and women who are stationed in South Korea, Japan, and elsewhere in the region - that is an attack on the United States and that capability unfortunately has been there for a while.

So we are in some ways waiting until they can hit the U.S. homeland, which is almost beside the point because Americans are already at risk in the region. We have treaty obligations with Japan and South Korea, and we would be obliged to treat any nuclear attack on them as a nuclear attack on the United States. So in some sense we are already there.

The threat is there but I would also not want to exaggerate it. My own estimation is that Kim Jong-un is not looking to start a nuclear war, not even a conventional war because he knows he would lose that war and I assume that the top priority for the Kim family is to hold on to power. So they are not going to at least intentionally start wars they are going to lose.

And frankly, while they have made progress in their nuclear missile programs, they are in the messy middle, where the horse is out of the barn but it hasn't jumped the fence and run down the road. They have the basic nuclear capability but they are not quite at the point where they have the militarily reliable secure second-strike which is the gold standard for nuclear weapons states.

So it is a threat, it's been a threat for a while. We don't really recognize it as such but there is still time to do something about it.

**3. Addressing the North Korean threat is going to be a key challenge for President Trump's administration. Thus far, repetitive cycles of sanctions and condemnation have appeared ineffective. What tools do you think are necessary to address North Korea's nuclear proliferation?**

*JW:* We cannot go at this with one hand tied behind our back. We have to make use of the foreign policy tools available to us. Part of that is smarter efforts at denying North Korea's ability to procure nuclear weapons technology and materials so that their program does not progress, or does not progress as quickly. Again, they are in a middle stage and it would be good to keep them there rather than letting them move forward.

We also need robust diplomacy, not only with our allies - South Korea and Japan - but also more robust engagement with China, and diplomacy with the DPRK. This problem is not going to be solved unless China is a full partner. The only way we are going to achieve our goal of denuclearization, short of war with North Korea or its collapse, is through some diplomatic settlement.

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We have had tremendous success with Iran in the Iran nuclear agreement. I don't think Iran and North Korea are the same at all, but it does point to the fact that if you want to stop and reverse the course of a country on its nuclear weapons path, then you are going to have to talk to them at some point. So I think while we have focused on sanctions and condemnation, we have put significantly less effort into being smart about denial policies and having a diplomacy that is as robust as our sanctions policy.

**4. You and your research partner John Park [released a report](#) this year on the role of sanctions in addressing North Korea's illicit business networks. What steps can the new Congress and administration take to increase the effectiveness of sanctions?**

*JW:* We outlined 11 different recommendations; some of them focused on China; we need to work cooperatively with China. The effective way that the Chinese can help stop the flow of technology materials in North Korea is by going after the private Chinese middlemen who are helping North Korea's state trading companies procure illicit goods. They can use their domestic laws, their anti-corruption campaign, their anti-counterfeiting laws, their anti-drug trade laws, and it's their interest to do so - and so we need to get on the same page there and help each other do this. Absent China's willing cooperation, we are not going to make any progress on this problem and that's just the reality.

Our other recommendations talk about capacity building; helping countries in South-East Asia improve their ability to track trade and illicit activity, things as simple as digitizing trade records. Other aspects of capacity building include improving the mandate and the resources available to the UN panel of experts that is doing a great job and putting more money (this is where Congress can help), in the State Department, in embassies in the region. North Koreans are using their embassies, their diplomatic personnel for the purpose of procurement and we need to step up and match that so that we have FBI or Treasury officials who can be assigned to these embassies to match the North Koreans one-for-one, as they attempt to procure WMD-related goods.

We need to train more people like we did with Iran. We need to train more U.S. diplomats or government officials who speak Korean who can go to countries like Malaysia and Singapore and engage the local Korean-speaking business community because in some ways, they are going to know faster than anyone else if North Koreans are there looking to procure.

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Overall, the big message we have coming out of the report is that this is an iterative game, we take actions but then North Korea gets to respond and they have innovated in the face of sanctions but we keep doing the same thing over and over again and pat ourselves on the back when we pass more sanctions and resolutions at the UN. That is not going to do any good if North Koreans take countermeasures and we don't respond to those counter measures, and don't take advantage of the new vulnerabilities their countermeasures give us. We have to be much more dynamic, much more iterative in how we deal with this problem.

**5. How can the United States walk the thin line of engaging with China and North Korea diplomatically, while also using sanctions to deny and punish North Korea for its behavior?**

**JW:** The sanctions are less of a problem than some other issues in U.S.-Chinese relations; in particular, the THAAD missile deployment has poisoned relations and inhibited the ability to get the sort of cooperation we need.

States operate primarily on national interest. China wants sustained economic growth so that it can maintain social stability. That's its chief challenge, bringing millions of people out of poverty and holding their political system together. They are not going to squeeze North Korea to the point where it collapses. They do not want a failed nuclear weapons state on their border. Equally important are the three provinces that border North Korea; they don't want them to go into an economic tailspin. If North Korea collapses, it would threaten their overall project of social stability. China is not going to commit suicide on our behalf.

On the other hand, China has a real interest in not seeing North Korea be a nuclear weapons state; they have important policy interests that are undermined with North Korean nuclear weapons and so they have been crystal clear in articulating their policy which is denuclearization. We are in agreement with that. So it seems to me that the business here is to cooperate with China and work on areas where we agree and try to stem the flow of weapons-related technology to the North, and then agree to disagree on other aspects of the policy. China is not going to sign on to squeezing North Korea to the point where it risks its own viability. We need to work cooperatively on the areas where we are in agreement. There is no solving this problem without Chinese cooperation. 90% of the trade that North Korea has is with China and trying to beat China with a stick as a way to get them to cooperate with us is virtually a contradiction in terms. We need a new approach here.

**6. You mentioned that the deployment of THAAD in South Korea has poisoned U.S. relations with China. What do you think about the deployment of THAAD?**

**JW:** I don't think it's a good idea. First of all, let's be clear, it's not ally-reassurance. The South Koreans are not banging on the door, begging us for THAAD. The Pentagon is forcing it on them. I don't find many people in the State Department who in quiet conversation are big THAAD advocates. In front of the TV cameras they might have to trot out the official line but I don't see a lot of enthusiasm there. If the South Koreans were demanding it, one could make an argument that we should do it so our ally feels more assured. But that is not what's going on here. Moreover, THAAD does not solve the problem if North Korea continues to make the rapid progress it has in submarine-launched ballistic missiles, THAAD does not deal with that. So it's not really getting us anywhere, it's ticking off the one country we actually need on our side to accomplish our goals.

**7. What should the United States goal be when engaging with North Korea?**

**JW:** Denuclearization is still the goal but that does not mean you walk into negotiations on day one saying denuclearization or nothing. That is not the way negotiations work. The U.S. goal and China's goal is denuclearization but it's not going to happen in one fell swoop.

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From a diplomatic or negotiations standpoint, it makes more sense to begin conversations and this will follow the path that most conversations like this follow, which is you go in (everyone knows the U.S. position and the position of other countries as negotiating partners is denuclearization), North Koreans are coming in (everyone knows their position is nuclear weapons forever), but you set that aside and then you talk about the other things you can do in the near-term. That would be first freezing the program, then putting more constraints on it, and then eventually rolling it back.

But we don't have to insist on perfection on the first day. If we were to freeze the program at its current levels that would be useful for reasons we have already discussed. There is plenty to talk about without all the parties coming in and insisting on the final outcome before a word has even been spoken.

**8. What in your opinion is the current state of engagement with North Korea?**

**JW:** Weak, weak! But this is not all the fault of the U.S. It takes two to tango. There have been occasions when the U.S. has said that it is open to negotiations, and the North Koreans have refused to join and vice versa, and of course this is not a U.S.-North Korea negotiation, as much as the North Koreans would like that to be the case. We have to do things in concert with our allies, Japan and South Korea, most especially South Korea, and everyone has to be on the same page and move as one in that direction. So at various times, one player might have been ready and another was not ready. Obviously right now, given the domestic crisis in [South Korea swirling around President Park](#), it might be a difficult time to initiate formal negotiations. But there are plenty of steps one could be doing to prepare for that moment, even if this is not the exact, perfect timing for formal negotiations.

**9. Is there any cause to be optimistic that the United States can successfully scale back North Korea's nuclear weapons program?**

**JW:** I would say yes, there is. I know Director Clapper made headlines by saying the North Koreans are never going to give up their nuclear weapons. But I have been talking to North Koreans for over fifteen years. I have heard them take every conceivable position on nuclear weapons; that they will give them up, that they will keep them forever, that they will adopt no-first-use, that they will hit the U.S. if the U.S. as much as frowns at them - every position on both extremes and



everywhere in between. So when it comes to North Korea, I say, never say never. There are enough surprises when it comes to North Korea that I think we need to play this directly and not just presume anything in advance. The North Koreans have agreed to limits on their programs in the past, they have made reference that they are open to that more recently, so I think that we should not prejudge this, we should push hard and explore every opportunity and see where it takes us.