North Korea’s nuclear and missile testing coupled with the White House’s bellicose rhetoric make the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula — even a catastrophic nuclear confrontation — higher now than at any time in recent history. Pyongyang’s sixth nuclear test in September 2017 and the increasing range of its missiles clearly demonstrate its determination to advance its nuclear program and intercontinental strike capability. From the United States, meanwhile, comes careless saber-rattling and confusing signals about diplomacy.

Kim Jong Un’s push for nuclear arms is driven partly by fear that without such deterrence he risks being deposed by outside powers and partly by perceived threats inside North Korea, notably elite rivalries, the tightly managed but still unpredictable impact of economic reform, and his difficulty in controlling information flow — including from foreign media channels.

The aggressive tone from Washington reflects equal urgency in the opposite direction. At least some senior officials believe North Korea must be prevented at all costs from advancing its nuclear program, in particular from being able to strike the continental United States with a missile carrying a nuclear payload. After crossing that threshold, they believe, Kim Jong Un will conclude that he can deter Washington from protecting its allies and thus impose demands — from lifting trade restrictions to expelling U.S. troops, all the way to Korean reunification on his terms. Those same officials appear convinced that he can be dissuaded from retaliating in the event of limited, targeted military action.

For now, the United States is implementing a “maximum pressure strategy”: corralling the Security Council into tougher sanctions, pressing China to do more to strangle its neighbor’s economy, conducting large Air Force and Navy drills, and signaling directly or through congressional allies that it does not fear military confrontation. Despite conflicting messages from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the Trump administration is making clear that it is not interested in talks whose goal would be anything short of North Korea’s denuclearization, an objective as worthy as it is delusional. As the White House sees it, the approach is working: U.S. military action is no longer unimaginable for either North Korea or China. It hopes the former will be compelled to back down and the latter will get them there.

But this approach means a race against time — with Washington almost certainly on the losing side. Restrictive measures will not bite immediately, and they will bite the North Korean leadership last; ordinary citizens will suffer sooner and worse. Feeling threatened, Pyongyang is more likely to accelerate weapons development than halt or slow it. Both China and South Korea support tighter sanctions and are as frustrated with Pyongyang as they are alarmed by the prospect of U.S. military
action. But South Korea has little power to alter the situation, China’s willingness to pressure North Korea may be reaching its limit, and its influence over a fiercely independent neighbor resentful of its reliance on Beijing is easily overstated. While Chinese President Xi Jinping fears the prospect of war on the peninsula bringing chaos, a possibly U.S.-aligned regime, and U.S. troops to his doorstep, he also fears that squeezing Pyongyang could precipitate turmoil that could spill over into China.

Without a viable diplomatic offramp, Washington risks cornering itself into military action. Even a precisely targeted attack would likely provoke a North Korean response. While Pyongyang would think twice before initiating a conventional strike on Seoul, it could take other steps: an attack on a soft South Korean target; an asymmetric strike against U.S. assets on or around the peninsula; or crippling cyberattacks. These might not immediately trigger regional conflict, but they would provoke an unpredictable escalation.

A successful diplomatic initiative ultimately will need to address two competing preoccupations: U.S. and wider international fears of what the Pyongyang regime would do with an advanced nuclear capacity, and the regime’s fear of what might happen to it without one. The U.S. government should marry its sanctions and those of the U.N. to a clear and realistic political goal. An incremental solution could include pauses on North Korean testing of its missile system or weapons, before Pyongyang crosses what the White House sees as a red line; the United States agreeing to less provocative military exercises; and consensus on humanitarian support even as sanctions kick in. That might not satisfy anyone. But at least it would provide the space needed to explore a more durable resolution.

[Image of North Korean soldiers]

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