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China Has Proliferated Nuclear Weapons. What Should America Do?

by Gordon G. Chang | May 2026

"The entire United States is within range of our nuclear weapons, and a nuclear button is always on my desk," Kim Jong Un, the supreme leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, boasted in January 2018. "This is reality, not a threat."[1]

Those words were definitely a threat, and Kim removed all doubt when in April 2022 he stated that these weapons would "never be confined to the single mission of war deterrent."[2] Those words, in substance, constituted a warning that he would use his arsenal pre-emptively.

The North's arsenal has boosted Kim's sense of power. He has, the *Wall Street Journal* reported in April, "emerged more confident and defiant."[3] That confidence and defiance makes him an even bigger threat and even more intransigent.

Today, the DPRK, as Kim's regime calls itself, possesses an estimated 50 atomic devices and fissile material for about 40 more.[4] It can, from all accounts, overwhelm America's ground-based missile defense system, which has only 44 interceptors, based in Alaska and California.

How did one of the most destitute states in history develop history's most destructive weaponry?

The world can thank Russia but primarily China. Russia in the 1980s helped Pyongyang build a 5-megawatt reactor, which produces plutonium, fissile material.

Then the Chinese regime took over. China helped the North build the bomb by, among other things, permitting the transfer of technology, materials,

and equipment. For instance, in the spring of 2016 David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security reported that North Korea was sourcing cylinders of uranium hexafluoride, vacuum pumps, and valves from China for use in its nuclear program.[5]

Moreover, a Chinese company, Dandong Hongxiang Industrial Development, late in 2016 was implicated in a scheme to sell to North Korea chemicals, including aluminum oxide, used in processing fuel for nuclear devices.[6] The flow of materials from China to North Korea continued for decades.

The North also got Chinese help indirectly, through the infamous Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan, the father of Pakistan's atomic bomb. Beijing began extensively helping the fundamentally unstable state build nuclear weapons in 1974.[7] Then, Khan merchandised what he obtained from China to others, especially Iran and North Korea. Khan said he began working with the North around 1991.[8] Among other things, he supplied equipment for centrifuges—supersonic-speed machines that separate uranium into different isotopes and upgrade the potent portion to weapons-grade purity—until as late as the middle of 2002.

Khan's network is thought to have done business with more than 20 countries before it was broken up in 2003.

China's general plan to use Pakistan to nuclearize the Middle East, the world's most volatile region, and adjoining North Africa was mostly a success. Beijing proliferated nuclear technology to build relationships with Riyadh, Cairo, Algiers, Damascus, and Baghdad.

And Tehran. Beijing aided Iran not only through the Khan network but directly as well, transferring materials and equipment the "atomic ayatollahs" needed for their bomb program.[9] We are still feeling the consequences of this ruthless stratagem today. The war in Iran, after all, is ongoing.

If there is such a thing as "managed proliferation," the Chinese are its masters, and they skillfully played "the proliferation card," their most powerful tool for accomplishing their most important strategic objectives. "There is a circle of countries that want nuclear weapons," said Richard Fisher, a China military analyst at the International Assessment and Strategy Center, in the first decade of this century, "and in the center of that circle of evil is China."[10]

By now, China has stopped proliferating not because it has become a responsible actor but because it has already transferred everything the North Koreans and Iranians needed to build an atomic device. As much as the world would like to think otherwise, the Chinese were willing to risk nuclear winter to get their way in the world.

Beijing is still shielding Pyongyang as it enlarges and improves its arsenal. China, at sea and at land crossings, is facilitating commerce that clearly violates U.N. Security Council sanctions on the North. The Chinese military is also interfering in sanctions-enforcement activity in China's peripheral seas. China's Hong Kong has become a major hub for proliferant activities. China's diplomats have done their best to disrupt the work of the U.N.'s Panel of Experts.[11]

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Every American president since the Cold War has talked about stopping the spread of nuclear weapons, but Washington's policies failed to end China's pro-proliferation moves. Is there anything the United States can do to stop Chinese proliferation? There are four avenues for President Trump: negotiating disarmament, using force to disarm rogue regimes, proliferating nukes to friendly governments, and starving rogue nuclear states.

First, Trump can try to talk rogues out of their arsenals. His efforts with the North Koreans, unfortunately, have so far failed. In March, Mr. Kim "expressed no regret over the breakdown in nuclear-disarmament talks with Trump more than seven years ago."[12]

Trump's failure was evident at both his meeting with Kim in February 2019 in Hanoi and during the aftermath of their "made-for-TV spectacle"—the characterization of the *New York Times*[13]—or "mesmerizing reality show"—the words of the Stimson Center's Joel Wit[14]—at their "snap summit" at the Demilitarized Zone in June 2019.

Now, Trump is reportedly pushing again for talks. Some think the American leader and Kim will meet in the later part of this year. There is, as Wit reports, even speculation that the pair will sit down in Beijing in the middle of May if Trump goes to the Chinese capital for his delayed summit with Xi Jinping.[15]

The prospects of success this time around are not high. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in April, the North is "quickly advancing its ability to expand its nuclear arsenal." It is, among other things, completing construction of what appears to be another uranium enrichment facility at Yongbyon, its main nuclear site.[16]

In the talks in his first term, Trump apparently considered a nuclear freeze. The move would have constituted an historic break in American policy, which since the beginning of the nuclear era in 1945 has opposed the spread of nuclear weapons. Moreover, since the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty went into effect in 1970, Washington has stood firm against any legitimization of arsenals, such as North Korea's, not permitted by that global pact. The freeze idea, however, went nowhere during the first term.[17] Ultimately, it never became official policy, and Trump officials, such as National Security Advisor John Bolton, denied they were pursuing the concept.[18]

In any event, Pyongyang rejected a freeze then and is not particularly receptive to it now. "Kim has suspended all meaningful dialogue with the U.S. and South Korea since the collapse of his diplomacy with Trump in 2019," reports the Associated Press. Kim this year has "rejected U.S. offers to resume talks, calling on Washington to drop its demand for North Korea's denuclearization as a precondition."[19]

Nonetheless, the idea of a freeze leading to some recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state is back on the table in Washington. Trump's National Security Strategy, released in December, includes no reference to denuclearization of the DPRK, a goal that has been in every such document since 2003. His 2017 strategy blueprint, for

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example, emphasized North Korea as a threat. The omission in the 2025 version, Reuters reports, has sparked "speculation that Washington may be angling to boost the chances of a diplomatic breakthrough with Pyongyang in 2026."[20]

Some say a recognition of the DPRK as a nuclear-weapons state is inevitable. The North announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty in January 2003 and detonated an atomic device in October 2006, thought to be its first test of such a weapon. North Korea thereby joined a small club: There are now only nine states known to possess nukes.

Kim Jong Un is now trying to take advantage of Trump's apparent change of decades-old nuclear strategy. "The concept of 'denuclearization' has already lost its meaning," the North Korean leader said in September 2025. Kim in December called on the United States to free "itself from its absurd pursuit of others' denuclearization."[21]

In February at the Ninth Congress of the ruling Workers' Party of Korea, Kim offered an olive branch of sorts: "We have no reason not to get along with the United States if it respects our country's current status, as defined in the constitution, and drops its hostile policy."[22] North Korea has amended its constitution on various occasions, most recently in 2023, to enshrine its possession of nuclear weapons.[23]

In the "second nuclear age," as Yale's Paul Bracken calls the post-Cold War period,[24] Trump's apparent approach is certainly more realistic, as Kim's comments suggest, but a recognition of North Korea as a nuclear weapons power could convince other states, at this turbulent moment, to seek nuclear arsenals of their own.

Other states such as Iran. Decades of negotiations have not worked with the Islamic Republic, which is not now thought to possess nuclear weapons. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action of 2015 was a failure as Iran violated the pact soon after it was inked. Tehran in August 2017 declared it would not permit inspections of military sites by the International Atomic Energy Agency, a clear violation of the agreement.[25] As a consequence, President Trump in the following year withdrew America from the arrangement after not providing the Corker-Cardin certification of Iran's compliance.

That means Trump had to either accept Iran as a nuclear power or resort to force. Twice he has used force. In June of last year, American planes in Operation Midnight Hammer struck three of Iran's nuclear facilities—Natanz, Fordow, and Isfahan—during the Twelve-Day War. Then Trump ordered a full assault on that regime beginning February 28. Trump instigated the ongoing war after Iranian officials boasted to his negotiators of their possession of 460 kilograms of 60%-enriched uranium, for which there are no peaceful purposes.[26]

Trump can use force against Iran because it did not have nuclear weapons, but what can the United States do to disarm North Korea, which can retaliate against America by launching a volley of warheads toward the American homeland?

Should, for instance, the United States reverse course and weaponize friends? While China was proliferating nukes, the United States was stopping partners from developing the ultimate weapon, specifically South Korea, in the first decade of this century, and Taiwan, in the 1970s. American policy, unintentionally, boosted Chinese power and

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gave Beijing no incentive to stop arming Pakistan, North Korea, Iran, and others.

At the moment, Beijing is threatening to annex in whole—Taiwan—or in part—most notably Japan and the Philippines—American treaty allies and partners. China's regime would have to abandon its plans if intended victims had their own nukes. As North Korea has demonstrated, the possession of only a few nuclear devices is enough to deter countries with the largest arsenals.

But will the prospect of the nuclearization of these victims motivate Beijing to disarm North Korea? Perhaps, but Kim Jong Un has made it clear he will never surrender his arsenal.

In any event, analysts might not have to look in horror if the United States spreads nukes to friends. The late Kenneth Waltz believed the more nuclear weapons states the better. His underlying logic is simple. "Where nuclear weapons threaten to make the costs of wars immense, who will dare to start them?" he asked.[27] So, according to Waltzian theory, the best possible result for humankind is the gradual spread of nuclear weapons, which is even preferable to no spread at all.[28]

The really good news, Waltz told us, is that arsenals of destructive weaponry not only moderate the behavior of big powers but small ones as well. "Rulers want to have a country that they can continue to rule," he noted.[29]

Waltz, despite the superficial logic of his position, was nonetheless wrong. For one thing, he assumes that leaders are rational and that they never miscalculate. His theory also assumes no accidental launches. We should not make any of these assumptions, however. As Konrad Adenauer, the first West German chancellor, aptly stated, "History is the sum total of things that could have been avoided." In fact, since 1945 there have been all types of mistakes that could have led to nuclear disaster.

A better plan is to starve regimes with illicit nuclear weapons arsenals and those trying to obtain them. Many say sanctions don't work, and they certainly have not been effective with the DPRK. In recent years, both Russia and, as mentioned, China have openly flouted U.N. rules on North Korea. The U.N. has not been able to stop either power —both are veto-wielding members of the Security Council—and the U.S. on its own has failed to impose meaningful costs.

The U.S. in recent years has been implementing sanctions in ways ensuring ineffectiveness. They are never comprehensive, they are imposed after long notice periods, and they are enforced without vigor. "Speed is everything," Agathe Demarais, author of *Backfire: How Sanctions Reshape the World Against U.S. Interests*, told NPR. "Sanctions tend to work fast or never," she noted. "They provoke a shock within the targeted economy."[30] Washington, by patiently going after one sanctions-busting entity after another gives bad actors time to adjust and make American sanctions ineffective.

At the moment, however, one set of American actions holds promise: the blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, which has cut off important revenue streams to Tehran. CNBC reports that Iran's economy is now in "freefall" due in part to the American blockade. Approximately 70% of Iran's export revenues were attributable to commodities and goods transiting that vital waterway.[31] That's roughly $435 million a day in lost revenue.[32] And to make matters worse for Iran, Washington, as a part of its "Economic Fury" campaign, has also imposed secondary sanctions on Tehran's main supporter, China.[33]

That action, in a turbulent world, now appears to be the ultimate sanction—and a new model for how to handle other nuclear weapons criminals.

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