Standing on an observation post at the edge of the Demilitarized Zone in April, Vice President Mike Pence said he found it “chilling” to see for himself the eyeball-to-eyeball faceoff between the totalitarian North Koreans and their counterparts from the democratic south.

The barbed-wire scar running the width of the Korean Peninsula and the cocked weaponry on either side are remnants of mind-numbing carnage in the 20th century. Between 1950 and 1953, the Korean War claimed the lives of an estimated 2.7 million Koreans, 800,000 Chinese, and 33,000 Americans. It all ended roughly where it started—on the 38th parallel, where Pence recently stood. Though there has been a prolonged cease-fire, a peace treaty between North and South, and their allies, has never been signed.

Pence delivered an unequivocal message at the DMZ on April 17: The long stalemate is ending. North Korea’s determination to threaten the US and its Asian allies with indigenous long-range nuclear missiles has put the “Hermit Kingdom” squarely on a collision course with the United States.

“The era of strategic patience is over,” Pence said, referring to a quarter-century the United States has spent offering carrots in the form of aid, and sticks in the form of sanctions, in an unsuccessful bid to halt Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons and missile programs. “President Trump has made it clear that the patience of the United States and our allies in this region has run out, and we want to see change,” Pence said. Either China pressures its client North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program, he said, or the US and its allies will achieve that goal “ultimately by whatever means are necessary.”

With the US Intelligence Community had estimated that sometime soon, North Korea would be able to plausibly threaten the US with a nuclear-armed ICBM. American officials continued to repeat the mantra that “all options” are on the table in response.

In fact, in 2015 the US and South Korea reportedly updated the classified Operations Plan 5027 for a potential conflict on the peninsula to reflect that new reality, according to globalsecurity.org. Last year, retired Army Gen. Walter L. Sharp, former commander of US Forces Korea, declared that North Korea’s preparations to launch a long-range missile with an unknown warhead should trigger a preemptive strike.

UNSAVORY AND RISKY

“Kim Jong Un has threatened the preemptive use of nuclear weapons against the US and other regional targets,” Adm. Harry B. Harris Jr., commander, US Pacific Command, said in his prepared statement for the Senate Armed Services Committee on April 27. “Kim’s strategic capabilities are not yet an existential threat to the US, but if left unchecked, he will gain the capability to match his rhetoric. At that point, we will wake up to a new world.”

That stark reality confronts the Trump administration with the geopolitical equivalent of a ticking time bomb and a small handful of unsavory, risky options.

The US can accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, possibly provoking a nuclear arms race in Asia and condemning the US and its allies to constant nuclear brinkmanship and blackmail on the part of Kim Jong Un.

With China’s cooperation, the US could tighten sanctions on Pyongyang until the regime gives in—seen by many experts as unlikely—or collapses altogether.

The US could launch a preemptive military strike that destroys North Korea’s nuclear weapons and missile facilities and attempt to decapitate its leadership. Such a course, though, could well spark a catastrophic Second Korean War that the Pentagon has estimated would cost more than a...
Korean President Park Geun-hye, who made preparing for reunification the centerpiece of her North Korean policy. Arguably more than any previous Korean President, Park sought international support for the idea and used it to try to inspire a more ambitious and younger generation of South Koreans who have known only partition. As part of a “unification as jackpot” project, Park formed a special committee to “prepare for Korean unification.” It was chaired by the President herself and included 70 Korean thought leaders from government, business, and academia.

Park’s push to keep the idea of reunification alive received a major boost in 2009, when the Obama administration and the South Korean government signed a “Joint Vision Statement” that made it a central goal of bilateral US-South Korean policy to establish “a durable peace on the peninsula … leading to [the] peaceful reunification on the principles of free democracy and a market economy.”

That “declaration was one of the most explicit policy statements on Korean unification ever made by Washington.” It was also the first time that reunification was cited as a specific shared goal of the US-ROK (Republic of Korea) alliance,” said Evan J. R. Rever, a nonresident senior fellow in the Brookings Institution’s Center for East Asia Policy Studies, speaking at a 2015 conference on “Cooperating for Regional Stability in the Process of Korean Reunification.” Most importantly, he said, “the Joint Vision Statement made clear the US position that the governing principles of a new Korea would be those of the ROK.”

The implication of the US-ROK strategic vision was clear: A democratic and capitalist South Korea would essentially absorb the North in much the same way that a democratic and prosperous West Germany ultimately absorbed former-communist East Germany at the end of the Cold War. In the case of North and South Korea, though, the disparities in relative wealth would be an order of magnitude greater and the challenges of integration far greater. According to the website Trading Economics, North Korea had a gross domestic product of just $6.1 billion in 2015, compared to South Korea’s GDP of $1.4 trillion.

Park envisioned a grand outreach to the North in three phases, with a confidence-building first phase of economic aid followed by a “commonwealth” of shared government responsibility, culminating in the peaceful reunification of Korea in the 2040-50 time frame, according to a 2014 report by the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A North Korean Hwasong-14 ballistic missile on a transporter on July 4. According to the state-run Korean Central News Agency the new ICBM is capable of hitting the United States with nuclear warheads.

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**A MAJOR OBSTACLE**

In the past, China has offered a major obstacle to talk of reunification. The communist regime in Beijing has refused to even officially broach the subject, rejecting the idea of a strong, unified Korea to its south that would be closely aligned with the United States. Chinese officials have also resisted the imposition of truly crippling sanctions that might actually convince Pyongyang to finally abandon its nuclear weapons program. They fear such coercion could destabilize the North and possibly create a flood of millions of refugees pouring over the Chinese border.

North Korea’s fast-trackled nuclear and missile programs under Kim Jong Un and the tensions they have caused, however, have already changed the strategic calculus of key players in the escalating drama. The US insistence that the era of “strategic patience” with North Korea is over, in particular, has forced China to reconsider whether the status quo on the Korean Peninsula is actually sustainable. The South Koreans are being compelled to confront the possibility of reunification on an accelerated timetable—and under far more destabilizing conditions. For their part, North Korea’s military and security leaders have to wonder whether an untested and erratic leader that critics in China have taken to calling “Kum Fouty the Third” is leading them to national ruin.

Beginning the recent deployment to South Korea of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) antimissile defense system, and the deployment of the USS Carl Vinson carrier battle group to the region, were steps taken to heighten readiness in a time of growing tensions. “That kind of preparation is necessary because at any moment a tactical situation with North Korea could escalate into a strategic conflict,” O’Shaughnessy said.

Regardless of how it begins, such a war in North Korea “would be the worst kind of fighting in most people’s lifetimes,” Defense Secretary James N. Mattis said on CBS News “Face the Nation” on May 28. North Korea has hundreds of artillery cannons and rocket launchers that can reach greater Seoul, where 25 million civilians live in a dense urban environment. “Bottom line is, it would be a catastrophic war … if we’re not able to resolve this situation through diplomatic means,” Mattis said.

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“A general who lived in besieged Seoul” is a novel by Jeong Seung-hun, a former South Korean general.

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**Reunification Northern Style**

From the beginning, that idealistic vision of peaceful reunification faced major obstacles that made it more of a pipe dream than a viable strategy. First and foremost, the regime in Pyongyang saw Seoul’s vision as an invitation to surrender and commit regime suicide. In typical fashion, it responded to the outreach with insults, threats, and military provocations, including North Korea’s 2010 sinking of a South Korean warship, killing 46 sailors, and an artillery barrage targeting a South Korean island that same year. It killed two marines. More recently, Kim Jong Un reportedly has developed a “reunification” plan of his own. It starts with massive artillery and short-range missile barrages to pound Seoul, followed by missile strikes with chemical warheads on US bases and ports in South Korea. Then, Seoul would be simultaneously invaded. Under strong, unified Korea to its south that would be closely aligned with the United States. Chinese officials have also resisted the imposition of truly crippling sanctions that might actually convince Pyongyang to finally abandon its nuclear weapons program. They fear such coercion could destabilize the North and possibly create a flood of millions of refugees pouring over the Chinese border.

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ground forces at the first signs of conflict or regime collapse.

“That would likely be met with South Korean and possibly US forces entering from the south, and you could get a World War II-like race to Berlin, only with US and Chinese forces rushing to secure North Korea’s nuclear weapons and possibly confronting each other on the outskirts of Pyongyang,” said Bennett. “The larger point is, the US and South Koreans have not done nearly enough to prepare for the possible collapse of the North Korean regime.”

Perhaps the most important preparation would be talks between US and Chinese officials on deconflicting their forces. Both sides will view securing North Korea’s nuclear weapons and avoiding a “loose nukes” scenario as a priority. They will likewise want to prevent a massive humanitarian crisis that could send refugees fleeing North Korea.

Such missions could indeed easily bring the Chinese and US-ROK military into close proximity. In any reunification scenario, the Chinese will undoubtedly demand assurances that no US forces would be permanently stationed above the 38th parallel. Those issues have already reportedly been the subject of “Track II” behind-the-scenes talks between US and Chinese experts and former officials.

“War between the United States and China sounds crazy to a lot of people, but it seemed even crazier before the first Korean War [in 1950] when a much weaker China attacked an uncontested world superpower to drive US soldiers out of North Korea and below the 38th parallel,” said Graham T. Allison. He is director of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs and author of the forthcoming book Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’ Trap?

Allison said he believes “China would go to war again if the alternative seemed to be a regime backed by the US military on its border with what is now North Korea.”

REGIME COLLAPSE?

Another useful preparation for possible regime collapse would be overt and covert messages to the North Korean military and security elite that they can look forward to a prosperous future in a unified Korea. Such messaging is needed to counter the perceived lesson of the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, when after the fall of the dictator Saddam Hussein, the ruling class was purged by US officials who dissolved the Iraqi military and launched a de-Baathification campaign. It cost many government functionaries and technocrats their livelihoods. As charter members in the George W. Bush administration’s “Axis of Evil,” the North Koreans haven’t forgotten the Iraq War.

“The Iraq example sent a very negative message to the North Korean elite, which the Kim regime has continued to reinforce with propaganda insisting that they would be executed by the West if reunification occurred,” said Bennett. “Compare that with the example of West Germany, which for decades broadcast a message to the East German secret police that they would be granted amnesty and pensions in the event of unification. There’s evidence that message stayed the hand of the East German police when collapse eventually occurred peacefully.”

US and South Korean officials will also need to agree on a time line for ratcheting up pressure on North Korea with sanctions. Given the existential stakes involved, South Korean officials insist on close consultations on any escalation in the current crisis, and they have asked for less red-hot rhetoric and saber rattling from Washington.

“Now is the time to abstain from tough talk that can send the wrong signal or be misinterpreted in a way that causes unintended consequences,” said a senior South Korean official, speaking on background in order to talk candidly. A surge of thousands of defectors from North Korea in the last 10 years, and subsequent debriefings, have convinced South Korean leaders that dissatisfaction with the Kim regime is now widespread and increasing.

“The North Korean people have a growing understanding of the outside world, and they know they do not live in paradise,” he said. “So if all the major players, including the Chinese, are willing to construct a very strong system of sanctions, we believe it could lead to the collapse of the regime. I wouldn’t bet against a united, denuclearized Korean Peninsula.”

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