

UPF Washington, DC: The Washington Brief - Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

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Washington, DC, USA -- The Washington Brief for Tuesday, January 3, 2023 featured as the guest panelist, **Admiral Harry Harris** (U.S. Navy ret). Adm. Harris was the U.S. Ambassador to Korea (2018-21) and Commander of the U.S. Pacific Command (2015-18).



The webcast, titled *North Korea Ups the Ante in Strategic Standoff*, was particularly timely and newsworthy because North Korea fired three short-range ballistic missiles in the direction of Japan just days before, the latest in an unprecedented number of missile tests in 2022. Add to that the North's multiple drone incursions across the DMZ at about the same time. In addition, at the first of the year there was an unexpected, large-scale reshuffle of senior Korean People's Army officials. Then on New Year's Day, Kim Jong-un's major policy directions for 2023 included promises to "exponentially increase the country's nuclear arsenal," to mass produce tactical nuclear weapons, to develop a new ICBM, and put a spy satellite into orbit.

That's an awful lot of news, all of it disturbing, to handle in such a short period. Destabilization has a tipping point, and many forces are converging. Where are we headed in the coming year, and what are our options?

Regular panelists included former six-party talks envoy **Amb. Joseph DeTrani** as moderator, and Georgetown University security studies professor **Dr. Alexandre Mansourov**. **Dr. Michael Jenkins**,

president of The Washington Times Foundation, was the host of the webcast.

The days of trying to "negotiate away" [North Korea's](#) nuclear weapons program through diplomacy alone are over, Adm. [Harris](#) said, arguing that the U.S. and its Pacific allies must "up our combined game" in the face of growing threats from [Pyongyang](#). He said it is becoming increasingly clear North Korean leader Kim Jong-un has no intention of abandoning his nuclear programs despite years of diplomatic and economic pressure from the U.S. throughout administrations of both parties. His comments attracted a great deal of interest from the Korean press corps in the U.S. because of the recent missile firings from North Korea, and startling pronouncements from Kim Jong-un regarding the intentions of Pyongyang for an "exponential" expansion of his nation's nuclear arsenal in the coming year.



The Biden administration and America's Pacific allies fear that Mr. Kim may soon order another nuclear weapons test, which would be the country's first since 2017. Adm. [Harris](#), the former head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, said that threat must be taken seriously.



"Why is [North Korea](#) ... a challenge for the entire world? The answer is simple: Kim Jong-un's missiles point in every direction," he said. "The North's unrelenting pursuit of nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them, and its unmitigated aggression toward the South and to the United States should concern us all."

"I believe our heretofore U.S. policy goal of negotiating away [North Korea's](#) nuclear program has reached its useful end," Adm. [Harris](#) continued. "We must up our combined game. Deterrence by appeasement is not deterrence at all."

The use of direct diplomacy with Mr. Kim reached its peak during the Trump administration, when then-President Trump held three unprecedented in-person meetings with the North Korean leader, including a historic joint visit to the Demilitarized Zone. But those talks failed to produce an agreement to end [Pyongyang](#)'s nuclear program or ease U.S.-backed sanctions on the North's economy. Mr. Kim has since then steadily ramped up his provocations while ignoring all diplomatic overtures from the Biden administration.



Last year alone, for example, [North Korea](#) carried out more than 70 ballistic-missile launches.

Specialists say any remaining hope of using diplomacy alone to slow [Pyongyang](#)'s nuclear program and halt its missile launches is quickly evaporating.

"Another disappointment for me from the last year was the fact that the United States and [South Korea](#) failed to entice, or compel ... [North Korea](#) to return to the denuclearization talks," Alexandre Mansourov said in the webcast, which was moderated by former CIA official and longtime U.S. diplomatic adviser Joseph DeTrani.

"The way it looks to me now, diplomacy is dead," Mr. Mansourov said. "I don't see any prospects for the resumption of the six-party talks, to be honest, and any other initiatives." The six-party talks were multilateral negotiations involving the U.S., [South Korea](#), [North Korea](#), Japan, Russia and China. The initiative ended more than a decade ago.

But [Pyongyang](#)'s missile tests aren't the only cause for concern on the Korean Peninsula. North Korean drones have also crossed over the DMZ and into [South Korea](#) in recent weeks, sparking fears that direct conflict between the two nations is inching closer. Adm. [Harris](#) said the U.S. and [South Korea](#) must ramp up defensive systems to counter such uncrewed craft.

"Anti-drone warfare systems have to be in place in [South] Korea," [he](#) said. "We clearly need to have them there, and the rules of engagement need to be discussed and war-gamed so the commanders on the ground at the tactical level know how to respond and not have to seek permissions, which could take hours, if not days, to get. And by then it's too late."

Even as the U.S. and [South Korea](#) work together to counter [Pyongyang](#), confusion emerged this week over whether the nations may hold joint nuclear exercises. South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol reportedly said earlier this week that such drills are under discussion.

President Biden shot down that idea Monday, offering a one-word answer when asked by reporters whether the U.S. was weighing joint nuclear exercises with Seoul. "No," Mr. Biden said.

A spokesman for Mr. Yoon said the president's words had been misinterpreted and said that instead of exercises the two allies are "discussing information-sharing, joint planning and joint execution plans regarding the operation of U.S. nuclear assets, in order to counter [North Korea](#)'s nuclear threats."