

U.S. Domestic Politics and North Korean Denuclearization

Patrick McEachern

Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow and Wilson Center Public Policy Fellow

Patrick.McEachern@wilsoncenter.org

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Views do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. government or Department of State.

Assumptions and Possible Domestic Political Constraints

- Public Opinion
- Specialized Opinion: The President's Political Base & Interest Groups
- National vs. Targeted Political Impact: Mid-term Elections (November 2018)
- Bureaucratic Politics

General Job Approval

- President Trump's net approval rating is the lowest among the last dozen U.S. presidents at the same stage of their presidencies. Source: [FiveThirtyEight](#)
- Over the last year, President Trump's job approval has been steady.
- Disapproval rate was 13 points higher than approval rate one year ago and remains the same today. Maximum gap was 21 points. Source: [RealRealPolitics](#)
- Timing of approval rating changes show a series of issues related to personal conduct, personnel changes, comments on race, Russia investigation, and policy choices have affected President Trump's net job approval rating but only temporarily.

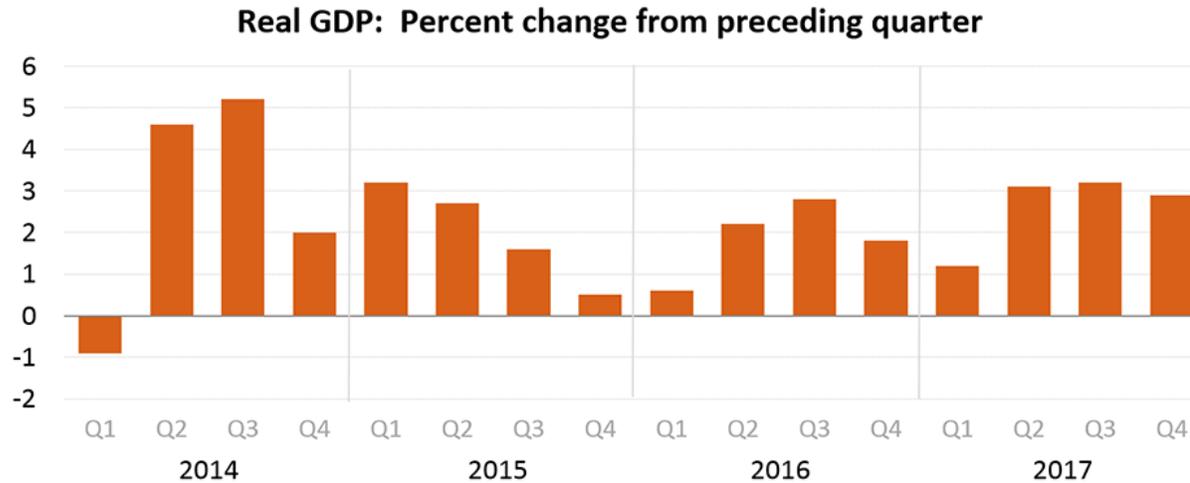
Sources of Presidential Job Approval

Net negative influences in red; net positive influences in blue

- Direction of the country, foreign policy, and the economy.
- **Direction of the Country:** A year ago, 60 percent of respondents said the United States is moving in the wrong direction. Today, it is about the same at 57 percent.
- **Foreign Policy:** Similar numbers on foreign policy. About 54 percent disapprove of the President's foreign policy.
- **The Economy:** President Trump's saving grace. More approve than disapprove with an approval rating nearing 50 percent and disapproval about 45 percent. Significant improvement since beginning of 2018.

The President's Support on the Economy

- Economic Data vs. Stock Market



U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis

Seasonally adjusted at annual rates

Stable and positive but not extraordinary economic growth



Extraordinary stock market growth

U.S. Polling on Diplomacy w/ North Korea (1/5)

Americans Care about North Korea Policy...

“Situation with North Korea” is the highest single-issue national security matter concerning Americans. Six percent (6%) of Americans called it the most important problem facing the country. Source: [Gallup](#), “Most Important Problem” poll

75% of Americans call North Korea a “major threat” – more than cyberattacks, ISIS, Russia, China, or any other single matter. Source: [Pew Research](#), Oct 25-30, 2017

...but Americans Care about Other Issues More Commonly

15 other issues stand ahead of the “Situation with North Korea” on the country’s most pressing matter even when excluding all economic issues. Americans prioritize leadership, guns, immigration, race relations, ethics, health care, the environment, education, crime, and poverty ahead of the situation with North Korea. Source: [Gallup](#), “Most Important Problem” poll

Though a “major threat,” North Korea does not register among Americans’ top policy priorities. Terrorism, education, the economy, health care, social security, Medicare, the environment, jobs, poverty, crime, race relations, transportation, drugs, the budget deficit, immigration, lobbyists, climate, and trade top the long list. Source: [Pew Research](#), Oct 25-30, 2017

U.S. Polling on Diplomacy w/ North Korea (2/5)

Assumption that diplomacy with North Korea is a losing political proposition, but a [series of polls](#) shows Americans increasingly worried about the North Korean threat and wary of military action, especially before exhausting all diplomatic options.

North Korea is an uncommon poll question, further suggesting it is not a major voting issue in the United States. Challenge that the timing of the polls fail to capture fast-moving and significant diplomatic developments.

"Do you have confidence in the top national security and diplomatic officials to handle the situation with North Korea, or not?"

Have Confidence – 65%

Do Not Have Confidence – 28%

Unsure/No answer – 7%

Do you think that the U.S. should negotiate with North Korea, or do you think it is a waste of time?"

U.S. Should Negotiate – 65%

Waste of Time – 30%

Unsure/No answer – 6%

Source: Quinnipiac University Poll, Oct 5-10, 2017, N=1482 registered voters nationwide, margin of error +/- 3%

U.S. Polling on Diplomacy w/ North Korea (3/5)

American support for diplomacy rose after announcement of U.S.-DPRK summit.

Support for direct U.S.-DPRK negotiations on denuclearization in late April/early May 2018

- Approve – 71 percent
- Disapprove – 21 percent
- Don't know – 8 percent

Source: [Pew Research](#), April 25-May 1, 2018

- U.S.-DPRK summit had no impact on President Trump's daily approval rating before/after June 12. Source: [FiveThirtyEight](#)

U.S. Polling on Diplomacy w/ North Korea (4/5)

- Interestingly, supporters and opponents of U.S.-DPRK diplomacy have similar perceptions of North Korean seriousness about denuclearization:
 - About 4 in ten think North Korea is serious among diplomacy supporters and opponents.
 - However, supporters of U.S.-DPRK diplomacy are much more unsure. 14 percent said they “don’t know” if North Korea is serious, suggesting they are more likely to want to give diplomacy a try.
 - Opponents of U.S.-DPRK diplomacy were more sure that North Korea wasn’t serious (60 percent vs. 47 percent).

U.S. Polling on Diplomacy w/ North Korea (5/5)

- President Trump enjoys far more public support for diplomacy with North Korea than President Obama saw in negotiations with Iran.
- North Korea diplomacy approval: 65-71 percent
- Approval for President Obama's Iran nuclear diplomacy:
 - September 2006: 54 percent
 - October 2009: 63 percent
 - March 2015: 49 percent

Source: Pew Research, [various polls](#)

- **Conclusion: President Trump has substantial domestic political space to negotiate with Kim Jong Un.**

Specialized Opinion (1/2)

- The President's Political Base
 - Not a clearly defined group with multiple attempts to categorize. None include North Korea policy as a core voting issue for the President's base.
 - A political base, by definition, is characterized by its deep loyalty for a candidate. The base is unlikely to waver in its support over an issue they do not consider central.
- Republicans favor NK negotiations over Democrats
 - 85 percent of Republicans support President Trump's NK diplomacy vs. 63 percent of Democrats
 - By contrast, only 40 percent of Republicans supported President Obama's Iran diplomacy in March 2015 vs. 60 percent of Democrats. Source: Pew Research, [various polls](#)
 - Assumption that Democrats favor diplomacy with these states, while Republicans do not is not supported by the data.
 - Trump enjoys the same Democratic support for negotiations that Obama had for the Iran deal AND partisan political support from his party.

Specialized Opinion (2/2)

- Interest Groups
 - Neither the list of 50 top contributing interest groups, 25 top-contributing interest groups for Republicans, nor largest interest groups by membership are directly related to the North Korea issue.
 - Defense contractors saw stock prices [increase](#) after the bellicose U.S.-DPRK rhetoric in 2017 but they are only the 18th largest contributors to Republicans and no evidence this group is driving political decisions.

Source: [Center for Responsive Politics](#)

U.S. Midterm Elections – November 2018 (1/2)

Senate (Upper House): Currently, 51 Republicans and 49 Democrats.

- Senate terms are six years, so about one third of the total seats are contested every two years.
- Democrats need to *net* an additional two seats to regain control of the Senate, but this looks difficult.
- In 2018, 35 Senate seats are contested, but only nine are Republican. Senate [map](#) favors Republicans. About half of the seats on each side look “safe” currently.

U.S. Midterm Elections – November 2018 (2/2)

- House of Representatives (Lower House): Currently, 235 Republicans and 193 Democrats (and 7 vacancies).
- All House seats are contested every two years. Need 218 of the 435 seats for a majority. Democrats need to turn a net 25 seats to regain control, which appears more likely than in the Senate.
- In April, Republican House Speaker Paul Ryan announced his retirement at the end of the term. Suggests expectation that Democrats may retake control of the House.
- A simple majority vote in the House can “impeach” a President. Two-thirds in the Senate is required to convict.
- North Korea policy does not appear to be a top issues in any of these elections.

Bureaucratic Politics (1/3)



Secretary of State
Mike Pompeo



National Security
Advisor
John Bolton



Secretary of
Defense
James Mattis

Bureaucratic Politics (2/3)

- Pompeo: In Senate confirmation hearing, emphasized diplomatic resolution. “First, diplomatic efforts are underway to rid the world of a nuclear North Korea. There is no higher diplomatic task for the State Department team than solving this decades-in-the-making threat to our nation.” ([SFRC, 4/12/18](#))
- Bolton: Final op-ed on North Korea prior to entering office presents the legitimacy of preemptive military strikes to address North Korea’s nuclear and missile threat to the United States. ([WSJ, 2/28/18](#)) In April and May, Bolton talks about “Libya model” of denuclearization.
- Mattis: Publicly, he [defers](#) to the State Department and White House. Previously [noted](#), “Our response to this threat remains diplomacy led, backed up with military options available to ensure that our diplomats are understood to be speaking from a position of strength.”

Bureaucratic Politics (3/3)

- Inter-agency negotiations are normal, frequently opaque on the outside, and a regular part of working in government.
- Based on his frequent public engagement on the North Korea topic, President Trump appears to be intimately involved and making the final decisions. Clear presidential decision-making can limit the salience of any inter-agency disagreement.
- Bottom line: The President is not constrained on North Korea policy by bureaucratic politics.

Conclusions

- President Trump is not constrained by general public opinion on diplomacy with North Korea.
 - Not a major determinant of Presidential job approval.
 - Existing polling shows majority *support* for negotiations.
- President Trump's political base does not rally around this issue.
- There are no significant American interest groups dedicated to lobbying on this issue.
- There may be different perspectives on the best approach to North Korea within the Administration. Despite opacity, the inter-agency process appears manageable.
- In sum, domestic politics does not appear to be driving the United States' North Korea policy, rather a genuine effort to best grapple with a long-standing and difficult problem.