

Joe Biden Beware: Another Round of Maximum Pressure Will Fail in North Korea

The Obama administration's essentially sanctions-only policy failed to stem the North Korean nuclear and missile programs. Why would the same policy under a Biden administration yield a different result?

Doug Bandow

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With Washington now frankly working to contain the PRC economically as well as militarily, Beijing has even less reason to cooperate. The North poses a military challenge to America and divides Washington from South Korea. Moreover, no Chinese government wants to see a united Korea allied with America and U.S. troops on its border. Even a less confrontational approach from the incoming Biden administration is unlikely to cause Beijing to make potentially permanent concessions that could be used for ill by future U.S. administrations.

Finally, Flournoy, like most other Washington officials, apparently assumes that threats of sanctions and war only work one way: they deter and coerce. Tell Kim that we will ruin his economy and might bomb his country, and he will quickly genuflect, nuclear weapons in hand, to the U.S. president. Of course, that strategy hasn't worked, even though at least four presidents so far have employed that tactic. Bill Clinton, like Trump, apparently came close to launching military strikes.

This persistent failure might reflect the fact that U.S. threats have another impact: they engender resistance. Including the determination to arm oneself to deter and, if necessary, defeat any attack. Which is overwhelming the role of nuclear weapons.

Washington has made clear, year in and year out, against many different nations, that it is prepared to wage war in many different forms whenever and for whatever reason that it desires: Panama, Serbia, Haiti, Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Somalia, and Pakistan have been among the targets. Regime change was effected in Afghanistan, Haiti, Iraq, Libya, and Panama. Serbia was dismembered. Somalia, Syria, and Yemen were further ravaged.

And any American promise of goodwill would be of no value. Gaddafi, who yielded his nuclear and missile programs, was feted in European capitals before being tossed aside when convenient. After Washington made a deal with Iran, which the latter kept, the Trump administration voided the agreement and launched an even more virulent economic war on Tehran, with the possibility that supposed centrist Biden might follow suit. Washington even threatened to sanction Iraq, supposedly liberated by America's invasion, with its sovereignty restored, if it demanded the exit of U.S. forces.

American officials should ask how the American people would respond in similar circumstances. A couple of centuries ago the newly empowered Americans responded to naval depredations by

the Barbary states with the slogan: “Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute.” There is no reason to believe that their response today would be any different. Nor that people in other nations would look at the issue any differently.

Sanctions may be useful as part of negotiations for the incoming administration, but negotiations should be paramount. The Obama administration’s essentially sanctions-only policy failed to stem the North Korean nuclear and missile programs. The Trump administration’s “maximum pressure” campaigns against multiple countries—North Korea, Iran, Syria, Venezuela, as well as slightly less brutal sanctions against Cuba and Russia—had no noticeable effect on the target governments. In the end, the demand for abject submission naturally created strong resistance and bolstered the justification for the underlying policy.

President-elect Biden is nothing if not a conventional thinker. Alas, a conventional response to North Korea is likely to fail, making a future crisis more likely. We live in unusual times. The incoming administration should develop its policies toward the DPRK accordingly.

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is author of Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World and co-author of The Korean Conundrum: America’s Troubled Relations with North and South Korea.