



America Must Come to Terms with North Korea's Nuclear Weapons

Recognition of reality should govern U.S.-North Korean relations in the future--no matter who wins the White House come November 3.

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If President Donald Trump is defeated on November 3, will his most dramatic initiative, engaging North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, fade away along with Trump's presidency? Many in Washington hope so.

His initiative receives little more than scorn. The Washington Post's Joby Warrick and Simon Denyer recently wrote on how even as Trump and Kim forged their unlikely bromance, the latter was expanding his nuclear program. Jeffrey Lewis of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies observed: "North Korea hasn't stopped building nuclear weapons or developing missile systems; they've just stopped displaying them."

The account had a slightly shocked, breathless tone. While the two leaders amiably exchanged friendly missives "Kim was busy creating an illusion of a different kind. At six of the country's missile bases, trucks hauled rock from underground construction sites as workers dug a maze of new tunnels and bunkers, allowing North Korea to move weapons around like peas in a shell game. Southeast of the capital, meanwhile, new buildings sprouted across an industrial complex that was processing uranium for as many as fifteen new bombs, according to current and former U.S. and South Korean officials, as well as a report by a United Nations panel of experts."

Yet this was to be expected. The problem was not that the two countries were talking. The problem was that they were not dealing, after not talking for years. And there was never any chance that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea would halt its program absent an agreement. After all, with its policy of "strategic patience" the Obama administration essentially ignored the North, preferring to tighten relations with Washington's ally South Korea. So the DPRK forged ahead reprocessing uranium and testing nuclear weapons. Which was the only response whichever was likely, even imaginable.

First, the North is committed to its nuclear program. Maybe Kim Il-sung would have negotiated away his nukes in their nascent stage for the right concessions. Perhaps a great opportunity was lost when North Korea's Great Leader died two weeks before his planned 1994 summit with South Korean President Kim Young-sam. The two might have struck a denuclearization deal and implemented its terms. Possible, anyway, though not likely.

That moment passed long ago. Governments always are going to be more willing to yield a potential weapon rather than an existing nuclear weapon. Having mastered the technology,

invested heavily to develop an arsenal, and created the necessary ancillary support, such as missiles, no regime worried about its survival will easily toss that all away. And certainly not for unenforceable promises of goodwill. The only nuclear weapons state to abandon its arsenal was South Africa, as the white leadership decided to deny that power to the impending black majority government.

Second, U.S. threats increase Pyongyang's incentive to create, maintain, and expand its nuclear force. The president leans toward feverish, inflammatory rhetoric, such as warnings of “fire and fury.” American policymakers imagine that sending bombers overhead and fleets offshore cause DPRK officials to cower under their desks in fear, ready to genuflect toward Washington. More likely, such affirmations of U.S. military power reinforce the regime's determination to defend itself, irrespective of cost.

For some reason, the avid hawks populating America's capital assume that only Americans are brave, committed, determined, nationalistic, and ready to resist foreign pressure. Everyone else around the world are viewed as wimps and cowards, prepared to yield to the most extreme U.S. demands. In fact, people elsewhere typically react like Americans do when threatened—rally around their leaders, prepare to defend themselves, invest heavily in their armed forces, pay the price necessary to oppose foreign foes. Especially in authoritarian systems, where information is controlled and opposition is outlawed.

Third, Washington's behavior suggests that America is both a threat and an unreliable negotiating partner. Of course, Pyongyang is not to be trusted. However, that doesn't mean North Korean fears are unreasonable.

In the post-Cold War world Washington has adopted the most militaristic policy of any nation, threatening, bombing, invading and otherwise intervening in multiple nations: Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnian Serbs, Serbia, Iraq (twice!), Afghanistan, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Hundreds of thousands of foreign peoples have died as a result of U.S. military action in the last two decades. Hundreds of thousands!

As for diplomacy, the U.S. fulfillment of the almost ancient Agreed Framework was reluctant, inconsistent, and delayed. Washington attacked Iraq after ignoring inspection results and manipulating evidence to suggest that the latter had a nuclear program. The United States and Europe made a deal to denuclearize Libya but backed regime change the moment it seemed possible. Trump abandoned the carefully negotiated nuclear deal with Iran and attempted to force Tehran's de facto surrender with crushing sanctions. Washington similarly applied “maximum pressure” on other vulnerable regimes, Venezuela and Syria, most notably. Anyone trusting the Trump administration's word is a fool and not long for this world.

Fourth, no skilled negotiator abandons his leverage. Steadily increasing nuclear activity applies pressure on the United States to make a deal. Why would Kim Jong-un abandon that? Washington might not admit it, but America is the supplicant. It is asking the North to abandon apparently successful missile and nuclear programs. Expecting Pyongyang to desist in those activities while negotiating—assuming that is what was occurring when Trump and Kim were exchanging “love letters”—is unrealistic, even fantastic. Anyway, U.S. pressure, in the form of economic sanctions, remained as well.

Fifth, refusing to recognize reality is foolish. Virtually no one within the Washington policy community believes that the DPRK will abandon its nuclear weapons. After all, what sane leader of a country on Uncle Sam's Naughty List would voluntarily surrender the weapon which most deters foreign attack? Yet there remains almost uniform opposition to acknowledging the obvious.

Unfortunately, setting an impossible objective encourages the looney warmongers, like Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), who have suggested that a nuclear war arising from U.S. preventive military strikes would be no big deal since the fighting would be "over there," not "over here." Given the potential for hundreds of thousands or millions of casualties, such an attitude is clearly irresponsible—indeed, frankly mad.

Some analysts advocate forever increasing sanctions on the North and targeting China and Russia as well, in the hope that Kim or his successor will eventually surrender. Just keep doubling down on today's failed policy and maybe a miracle will occur! However, Cuba's communist regime has been subject to increasingly tough economic sanctions for sixty years and has yet to disband, as demanded by Washington. So far sanctions also have failed against Venezuela, Syria, Russia, and Iran. Against the North economic pressure is more likely to cause a cataclysmic collapse than accommodation and surrender. And the former would threaten a different set of disasters.

More likely, Pyongyang would further expand its arsenal. As Kim has done since taking power. Which would turn North Korea into a serious nuclear weapons state.

America doing nothing means the North will do more. Neither dropping bombs nor imposing additional sanctions are the answer. Which leaves diplomacy. By whoever ends up winning on November 3. In which case Trump's initiative, despite widespread establishment opposition, should—indeed, must—live on.

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