

Donald Trump's North Korea Strategy Must Survive

If Joe Biden should win the White House it seems clear he will dump many Trump policies. North Korea should not be one of them.

Doug Bandow

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Where U.S. relations with North Korea go is unclear whatever the election returns. President Donald Trump's summits with Kim returned meager results and relations cratered after the failure of last year's meeting in Hanoi. Joe Biden said he would meet Kim Jong-un only with preconditions, specifically that Kim "would agree that he would be drawing down his nuclear capacity."

Yet officially engaging North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un was the Trump presidency's one dramatic foreign policy innovation. It was an unpopular maneuver with the Korea policy community but recognized that U.S. denuclearization efforts had reached a dead-end. There is no serious alternative to continued negotiation, whoever takes the oath of office on January 20.

Trump was much abused for his behavior at the resulting summits and their paltry outcome. Yet if Trump had refused to talk with Kim, the only other choices were war, which was no option at all, and revived isolation, which previously achieved nothing. Anyway, the summits left America no worse off than had the Obama administration's decision to largely ignore the North as the latter expanded its nuclear arsenal and missile inventory.

And the president is right to insist that his approach to North Korea delivered benefits. Although he did not prevent a war as he claimed, since it was him who almost provoked one, he did reduce tensions and halt the North's long-range missile and nuclear testing, notable accomplishments. He also generated a very general roadmap for disarmament if not denuclearization, the Singapore declaration. Kim made clear his expectations: better bilateral relations, improved regional security, and then discussion of denuclearization. This is more than Obama achieved in eight years.

Perhaps aware that it would be difficult to convince Americans that Trump failed on North Korea since missiles and rhetoric were no longer flying, Joe Biden took a different tack. During their last debate Trump explained that "North Korea, we're not in a war" and "We have a good relationship." Biden responded: "That's like saying we had a good relationship with Hitler before he, in fact, invaded ... the rest of Europe. Come on."

The comparison made little sense, and you know that an argument has come to its useful end when someone plays the Hitler card. What petty dictator has not been compared to the man who started the worst war in human history, pioneered mass murder and destruction, and attempted to annihilate an entire people? So, it probably was inevitable that Kim would be tagged as the latest faux Hitler, even though they in no way resemble each other.

While misguided, the tactic highlighted the challenge of dealing with dangerous dictators. In fact, in a less crass way human rights advocates raised the issue of Pyongyang's brutal domestic policies. To some observers, an improved bilateral relationship suggests acquiescence to mass incarceration and mistreatment of the North Korean people. Thus, some analysts urge that any agreement start with human rights. Yet the United States has no better means to force democratic change than denuclearization.

In the case of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, at least, it would be best to return Hitler to the lowest rung of Hell from which he was lifted by Biden. If Kim is Hitler, no useful agreement can be made. If Kim is not Hitler, treating the former like the latter will preclude progress. So what is the point?

The greatest risk, whoever is president-elect, is a return to the bad old days of 2017, with "fire and fury" on both sides. Kim is likely to demand attention even amid potential post-election confusion. Which suggests the incoming administration should indicate to Pyongyang that moving forward will be a priority, even if detailed negotiations might be delayed. And that contact and negotiation will be smoother without provocations.

Rather than start at the top with a summit, Washington should propose beginning at the bottom, doing whatever is necessary to improve the bilateral relationship, including official relations, renewed travel, restarting tourism, cultural exchanges, and more. Having decided to talk, there should be no limit on subjects, meaning human rights should be on the table. Discussing ideas on how to improve regional security also should keep diplomats in both capitals busy.

As for denuclearization, Washington should consult with Seoul over what kind of sanctions relief would most empower Seoul to develop common projects and build ties, diminishing in the mind of the North the chance of an allied double-cross as in Libya. Washington and Seoul should develop a variety of small disarmament deals which would move along the denuclearization road, promoting stability and security.

Then the hard bargaining with North Korea could begin. Formalizing a permanent end to missile and nuclear testing would be one goal. So would be banning sales of nuclear materials to other governments and especially non-state actors. Other goals would include the production of a nuclear inventory, a halt in nuclear reprocessing, and the destruction of existing facilities. And so on. There would be no quick victory, as envisioned by Trump when he first met Kim. However, the North Korean leader might be willing to go further than commonly assumed. He is his father's child, but he is very different in important ways. After more than seventy years, North Korea might have produced a leader that it is possible to do business with. At least, the possibility is real enough to test seriously.

Despite President Trump's perverse desire to eliminate anything associated with Barack Obama, many of their foreign policies are similar. But not toward North Korea. This time whatever the transition, the new administration should follow the Trump blueprint in concept if not detail. Engagement should remain the watchword, and that decision should be communicated to Pyongyang as soon as the president-elect is known. As Washington's ties with Beijing increasingly fray, it would be foolhardy to leave rocky relations with North Korea to chance. There already is enough crisis potential in Asia.

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.