



Counterpoint: Why Should North Korea Believe the United States?

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North Korea obviously wants to be a nuclear power with the ability to deter the U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sought to reassure Pyongyang about America's intentions. Unfortunately, however, the North's Kim Jong-un would be a fool to believe any promises made by Washington. Only actions count.

In recent days Secretary Tillerson went on a charm offensive of sorts directed at the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. He said America is not the DPRK's enemy and Washington is not seeking regime change. The implication is that Kim should relax, agree to give up his nukes and missiles, and enter into a beautiful new friendship with America.

The Kim dynasty, now on the third generation, faces enormous challenges. The DPRK remains desperately poor and is locked in a long-term competition with South Korea, which has around 40 times the GDP and twice the population. Moreover, Seoul is defended by the world's sole superpower.

The North can only depend on itself. For defense, nukes and missiles offer a comparatively cheap means of defense, given the impossibility of matching the Republic of Korea and U.S. in conventional forces.

Kim might want his country to become a nuclear power for other reasons, such as international status, but long-range missiles make sense only as a means to confront the U.S. If Washington wasn't threatening North Korea, Pyongyang would prefer to ignore the hyper-power half-way around the globe.

Thus, Tillerson hopes to convince the DPRK leadership that it has nothing to worry about. If only Kim felt safe, he would disarm and embrace Uncle Sam.

Should Kim believe Secretary Tillerson?

No knock on the secretary, but diplomats and their equivalents have been lying since the first negotiation at the beginning of time. Who can imagine the secretary instead declaring that the DPRK tops America's target list for regime change?

Even if Secretary Tillerson is truly inclined in that direction, why should anyone believe the same of President Donald Trump? He and his secretary of state have disagreed on a host of issues. Having already threatened military action and talked of sending armadas to the region, the president could easily overrule his secretary of state and opt for war.

Alas, no one knows what the president believes about the Koreans. He has said many contradictory comments. What foreign leader would trust President Trump to take a position—any position—and stick with it?

Moreover, the North Koreans surely are not ignorant of the strong war party in Washington. Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham have been talking up the likelihood of war.

Even if the DPRK abandoned its nukes, American politicians soon might be back advocating military action. Only a couple years before the ouster of Gaddafi McCain and Graham had dinner with the Libyan leader in Tripoli and suggested the possibility of foreign aid to reward his cooperation against al-Qaeda. Soon thereafter they were pushing for military action to oust him.

Nor is it enough to believe that President Trump won't change his position. President George W. Bush struck his deal with Ghaddafi. But the next administration ignored past deals and discussions of aid. Ghaddafi was vulnerable and the Western allies struck.

No one knows who will follow President Trump. If Kim disarmed, what would prevent a similar change of position in Washington?

If Secretary Tillerson wants to convince Kim Jong-un that the U.S. does not seek the North Korean dictator's ouster, the U.S. needs to act the part. That means reducing constant verbal and military threats against the North.

More important, Washington should bring home its troops from South Korea. The Republic of Korea is capable of defending itself. Seoul should construct the military and adopt the policies necessary to deter the North from attacking and win the war if one erupts.

That could include South Korean nuclear weapons as an alternative to the U.S. providing a so-called nuclear umbrella over the ROK. If Washington was not aiming its forces at the DPRK, the Kim regime would not be aiming back.

Secretary Tillerson has the right idea in trying to reassure North Korea about America's intentions. But only if Washington stops targeting the DPRK is the latter likely to see no need for a nuclear deterrent against America. Washington policymakers must decide if they believe defending South Korea is worth endangering the American people.

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