

Now is the Right Time for China and America to Strike a Deal on North Korea

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North Korea continues to be perhaps the most challenging issue between the U.S. and the People's Republic of China. President Donald Trump entered office apparently believing that he could force Beijing to make Pyongyang abandon its nuclear program; he threatened to “solve” the problem if China did not.

Yet even as he sent an aircraft carrier battle group to sit off the North's coast President Trump admitted that President Xi Jinping had convinced him that “it's not so easy.” The former also cited his “great respect” for the Chinese leader.

Which means there may be no better opportunity for the two governments to come to an understanding on the Korean Peninsula.

President Trump, known in business for making “deals,” indicated his interest in coming to terms on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. He offered a favorable trade agreement if the PRC would confront the North, principally through tougher restrictions on economic cooperation. China could end all commerce—which accounts for almost 90 percent of the North's foreign trade—and most of the DPRK's energy and food imports.

But trade concessions are not enough to induce Beijing to make such a dramatic policy change. After all, North Korea is even more a political and security issue than economic matter. Both the Chinese Communist Party and People's Liberation Army have a special interest in the PRC's relationship with the North. And though historical ties have frayed badly, China's relationship with the North is different than that with, say, Zimbabwe and Sudan, which are almost purely transactional.

Moreover, the PRC has significant interests at stake in the North. One is economic. Although North Korea is a difficult partner, Chinese firms have invested and traded much. U.S. commercial concessions might be seen as an offset, but the benefits likely would go to firms other than those which would suffer from tougher economic sanctions.

Although Pyongyang is a difficult actor, a Korean collapse could yield chaos on the PRC's border. The regime could dissolve, with factional conflict and even civil war. Thousands or millions of refugees could flee north across the Yalu River: South Korea's fortified boundary south of the DMZ would prevent any similar move in that direction.

Beijing also might feel it necessary to intervene to provide humanitarian assistance, install a pliant regime, or seize nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons and materials. That would risk confrontation with South Korean and U.S. forces, which might seek to do much the same.

Moreover, China would not welcome a united Korea allied with America hosting U.S. troops along the Yalu River. Although an army division wouldn't much matter in practical terms, it would be a powerful symbol, especially since the PRC intervened in the Korean War to prevent just such a development. And Washington should not expect China to surrender its ally, helping the U.S. construct a militarized containment system around the PRC.

These are significant barriers to agreement, but, in fact, a bit of compromise might make a deal possible. For instance, the U.S., South Korea, and Japan should develop a diplomatic package to reward North Korea for freezing its nuclear program, with more far-reaching negotiations to follow. The offer should be presented to Beijing for its review, since the PRC long has blamed Washington for driving the North into the proverbial corner. Then China could put its influence behind the allied offer.

The U.S. and neighboring states also should join China in studying the potential humanitarian needs if the Kim regime fell and disorder ensued. They should commit to enlist the United Nations and Korean diaspora while working with the PRC. Washington and Seoul also should accept the possibility of temporary Chinese military intervention in the North and create a means to coordinate the activities of respective armed forces if the North's government imploded.

In fact, Washington should indicate its willingness to tolerate most any role played by Chinese troops in the aftermath of a North Korean collapse. Even reconstitution of the North Korean government with new leadership under increased Chinese influence would be a fair price to pay to eliminate the threat of a North Korean nuclear arsenal.

Looking further into the future, Washington should pledge to withdraw U.S. forces from a reunified peninsula. They would have outlived their usefulness in deterring the North and could be sent home. Moreover, Seoul should commit to military neutrality, maintaining no permanent military relationship with either the U.S. or China. Beijing, Tokyo, and Washington should agree to respect that decision. Then reunification would be less threatening to the PRC.

Of course, as a sovereign nation the South is entitled to take any position that it wishes regarding future loyalties. But the Republic of Korea is stuck in a bad neighborhood. It would be worth sacrificing some of its freedom of action in order to eliminate the greatest military threat that it presently faces. In any case, the U.S. and Japan could agree not to ally with or station forces in the South.

Finally, President Trump should play a little geopolitical poker. During the campaign he suggested that it might be time for South Korea and Japan to build nuclear weapons. Of course, mainstream thinkers were horrified, but the North's growing capabilities make it ever more dangerous for Washington to maintain the "nuclear umbrella" over allied states. Moreover, if Beijing believed the threat to be real, particularly the prospect of a nuclear Japan, China would have an even greater incentive to press Pyongyang to stand down.

Putting such a pact together on North Korea would be a challenge. The governments would have to make painful concessions. Some degree of trust would be necessary.

Moreover, even additional pressure might fail to break Pyongyang's will. The Kim regime might emerge poorer but unbowed. Then everyone would have to reconsider policy afresh.

Even before taking office Donald Trump appeared to take a confrontational stance toward China almost across the board. However, he has softened his tone and appears to recognize that there are few simple solutions.

He should initiate serious negotiations with the PRC over what North Korea is and should become. Against the odds, Presidents Donald Trump and Xi Jinping just might find that they can do business together.

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