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President Trump Doesn't Understand North Korea Or China: His Ignorance Could Trigger A War

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North Korea shot off another missile and Washington went mad. Kim Jong-un is at the top of the news and the White House is in panic mode. The U.S. convened an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council.

You'd think the North was the dominant superpower and America was the small, impoverished state surrounded by hot enemies and cold friends. Which country tomorrow could turn the other into a genuine "lake of fire"? Hint: it's not the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

No one, other than Kim Jong-un and his friends, wants the DPRK to possess nuclear weapons. But contrary to what President Donald Trump appears to believe, Pyongyang has not embarked upon its missile and nuclear programs as some kind of international death ride.

After the latest test, the president asked of Kim: "Does this guy have anything better to do with his life?" The answer is no. Kim is turning his otherwise forgettable nation into an important regional player. North Korea might not quite be a Weltmacht, but it certainly is getting Washington's attention. As someone who enjoys traveling abroad strutting America's power, President Trump should understand Kim's motivation.

There's more, however. The weapons programs help cement the loyalty of the military, the one force which could end the Kim dynasty. Nukes provide a useful tool for international extortion. Moreover, Kim, like his grandfather and father, who respectively started and expanded the nuclear and missile work, has one overriding objective: deterrence. That is, Pyongyang wants to prevent America from attacking it.

Alas, U.S. officials don't get it. Defense Secretary James Mattis called the North "a direct threat to the United States." Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly warned that once Pyongyang can target America "we're at grave risk as a nation." UN Ambassador Nikki Haley called the launch "a clear and sharp military escalation." Secretary of State Rex Tillerson went even further, claiming that "Testing an ICBM represents a new escalation of the threat to the United States, our allies and partners, the region, and the world."

This is almost entirely hype. Commonly believed, but simply not true.

Most obviously, the DPRK isn't threatening "the world." Kim Jong-un has given no indication that he cares about "the world." He's never talked about attacking Russia or China, India or Pakistan, Europe or Africa, Canada or Mexico, or Belize or Brazil. None of them matter to the

North, other than as a possible source of money, licit or illicit. North Korea is as likely to war on one of them as it is to launch an expeditionary force to conquer the Moon.

Nor is the Kim regime targeting U.S. “allies and partners.” Pyongyang hasn’t focused on Singapore, New Zealand, Australia, and Thailand, let alone America’s European and Middle Eastern allies. The Republic of Korea and Japan sit under a bulls-eye largely for historical reasons: the South is the other half of the divided peninsula and Tokyo is the past oppressive colonial power. The former is in direct conflict with the DPRK while the second is seen as worthy of retribution and a possible belligerent in any future war. Ironically, America is being threatened because it is an ally of ROK and Japan, not the other way around.

The North Korean missile launch isn’t a “military escalation” in any meaningful sense. The U.S. already possesses nuclear weapons ready for use through a well-developed and –tested “triad” of missiles, aircraft, and submarines. A single American carrier group has the firepower of much of the North’s antiquated if large military. Washington “escalated” military capabilities long ago, and for perfectly good reasons. Today the North is attempting to minimally match the U.S. Is it an “escalation” when China, India, and Pakistan test longer-range missiles which America already possesses?

As for the U.S., the DPRK’s missile test poses a “threat” in the same way that an America missile test threatens Russia or China. Throughout the Cold War Washington was concerned about deterring attack from avowed enemies. Today the U.S. is doing the same from potential adversaries. The Kims’ overriding objective has been to prevent Washington from striking the North.

No doubt, Pyongyang’s possession of both nukes and ICBMs is bad news. Whatever the North’s intentions, its arsenal creates possibilities for mistake and error which could produce frightening results. The fact that the U.S. and DPRK both have leaders thought to be unpredictable, self-centered, and aggressive increases the risks. As does the fact neither likely understands his counterpart—country or leader. Nevertheless, there is no evidence that Kim Jong-un is suicidal: like his father and grandfather, he wants his virgins in this world, not the next.

But the point remains. The Kims have no interest in starting a war with America. North Korean officials still cite the damage done Pyongyang by allied bombing during the Korean War. The Victorious Fatherland Liberation War Museum (yes, they say they won!) displays pictures of the widespread destruction. The U.S. intervened against the North (for good cause, but never mind) and remains involved (with less justification, given how the South has raced past the DPRK on virtually every measure of national power). Look at both geography and force correlation: it is Washington that is threatening the North. America’s justification for doing so doesn’t change the practical reality.

Of course, North Korea uses rhetoric for political ends, but in this case the regime likely believes its argument. Three weeks ago I was in Pyongyang at the invitation of the DPRK Institute for American Studies, under the Foreign Ministry. I had a long interview with Choe Kang-il, Vice President of the Institute and Deputy Director General for North American Affairs at the Ministry.

He said his country had no choice but to build a nuclear weapon given the “hostile policy” of America as well as its “military threats and nuclear threats.” He argued that Washington’s nuclear threats dated back a half century. Choe also noted Washington’s proclivity for imposing regime change under successive presidents. Not only Afghanistan and Iraq, but Libya, whose Moammar Khadafy found himself unceremoniously ousted after negotiating away his government’s missile and nuclear programs. At the time the Pyongyang noted that it would never make a similar mistake.

It’s hard to dispute the North Koreans’ logic. President George W. Bush termed the North Korean regime a member of the “Axis of Evil.” President Bush also said he “loathed” Kim Jong-il, the present ruler’s father. President Bill Clinton seriously considered attacking the DPRK. Presidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama, and Trump all publicly threatened to do so. Kim Jong-un would have to be an awful trusting fellow to take Secretary Tillerson at the latter’s word when the latter said the Trump administration did not seek regime change.

And virtually no one really believes that Pyongyang will give up its nukes and missiles voluntarily. The North has called itself a nuclear state, including that status in its constitution. The Kim dynasty has staked its prestige on weapons development. Nothing else offers such an array of domestic and foreign benefits.

I asked Choe if the DPRK would denuclearize if America dropped its “hostile policy.” If the world’s other nuclear powers, including America, agreed to abandon their weapons, he responded, then the North would consider doing so as well. Simple interpretation: no.

Unfortunately, the Trump administration fails to see that every new military threat reinforces Kim’s determination to build nuclear weapons and ICBMs. There is one simple way to end the North’s threat to attack America: withdraw militarily from South Korea. Absent a U.S. threat to strike the DPRK, the latter wouldn’t do anything to bring Washington’s wrath back down upon it. Today the North’s nuclear threats against the U.S. are mostly a product of America’s defense of the ROK. Washington has to decide if it is prepared to forever risk Los Angeles and Seattle, and perhaps eventually Chicago and New York, to protect Seoul.

None of the alternatives look good. Military action might not get all of the North Korean nuclear assets and likely would trigger the Second Korean War, with devastating results to all concerned, especially the South, which would become a battleground. Tougher sanctions aren’t likely to work without China’s assistance, and even if rigorously applied the North still might resist and survive.

Anyway, so far Beijing has refused the Trump administration’s demand to “solve” the North Korean problem. While President Trump has been more publicly persistent, at least, than his predecessors in pushing the People’s Republic of China, he has been no more effective in changing the PRC’s policy. Chinese leaders will not act because Washington orders them to do so. Nor will they be moved by feelings of responsibility to some mythical “international community.”

Rather, they will base policy on a cold-blooded assessment of their nation’s national interests. A failed state on China’s border could loose armed conflict, starving refugees, and nuclear

materials on the PRC and beyond. Moreover, a united Korea allied with America with U.S. troops on the border would enhance Washington's barely concealed campaign to contain China. The existence of an independent DPRK, even one as difficult and obstreperous as that governed by the Kim dynasty, has seemed, at least until now, as a better alternative than joining America's campaign to destroy Beijing's one regional ally.

Having failed to win Chinese support within two months of telling PRC President Xi Jinping what to do, President Trump appears to have given up on China. But he never tried initiating a serious negotiation, which required acknowledging Beijing's legitimate interests and indicating what Washington was prepared to do in return. Such an effort still might fail, but would be better than sending in the bombers, as suggested by a growing number of people.

The only serious alternative may be accepting the North as a nuclear state. That's an awful option, but the U.S. should consider engaging the DPRK and negotiating for a verifiable freeze. It would be far easier, though still not pleasant, to live with a North Korea with an arsenal frozen at 20 nuclear weapons than one possessing 100 nuclear weapons and growing. Going down the path of military action truly is unthinkable, especially if other options, however disappointing, have not been explored. A potential nuclear North long has been an issue with only second best solutions.

If Washington is going to play a constructive role in maintaining peace in Northeast Asia, President Trump needs to recognize that North Korea is behaving rationally and, with regard to its perceived interests, responsibly. Only by addressing its rationale is a solution of some sort possible.

So, too, Chinese officials, like their American counterparts, are acting reasonably in their minds. Previous presidents have urged, demanded, and begged Beijing to deliver the North. None of those efforts succeeded. If President Trump wants to break the pattern he must put on his deal-making hat when approaching President Xi. Doing so might be the diplomatic equivalent of a Hail Mary pass, but it would remain the best play available.

It seems another day, another North Korean missile test. Pyongyang is only likely to accelerate both its missile and nuclear programs. Unless Washington shifts course, and soon, it will find itself facing a small power possessing a large capability. Then the price of arrogance or error by the White House could be a devastating war. It is time for serious thought rather than superficial slogans from the Trump Administration.

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