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## Washington Should Step Back In Korea: Is Donald Trump Or Kim Jong-Un More Dangerous?

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President Donald Trump has put all of Asia and much of the world on edge. All week he's gone mano-a-mano with Kim Jong-un, blustering like the frightened head of an international micro-state instead of the representative of the world's most important and powerful nation. Who imagined that people around the globe would be left wondering who was more stable: the 33-year-old "Supreme Leader" of the world's only communist monarchy or the duly elected president of the United States, long considered the leader of the free world?

There is no contest between the two nations, which helps explain North Korea's bluster as it attempts to develop a deterrent against U.S. attack. America's GDP last year was almost \$19 trillion, around *650 times* that of the North. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea's 25 million produce about as much as the residents of Anchorage, Alaska, or Portland, Maine. A *weltmacht* the DPRK is not.

Although North Korea devotes something like a quarter of its GDP to the military, its conventional armed forces are characterized more by quantity than quality. The DPRK probably has around 20 nukes, though they are of uncertain status and deliverability. Its practical missile capabilities are greatest at shorter ranges. Although Pyongyang is developing missiles capable of reaching America, they are not yet capable of successfully carrying warheads or targeting cities or bases.

In contrast, Washington spends upwards of 100 times as much as Pyongyang on the military. One carrier group possesses sufficient firepower to devastate the DPRK. And the U.S. sports the world's most sophisticated nuclear arsenal. Only a few of America's 1411 warheads would be necessary to turn Kim Jong-un's kingdom into a proverbial "lake of fire," which Pyongyang has so often threatened to do to others.

Of course, critical to deterrence is whether Kim recognizes the actual balance of power. Some Americans worry that he may believe his government's bombastic, splenetic, confrontational, and fantastic rhetoric. But the near hysterical language with which Pyongyang addresses the world is not new. Even without deployable nuclear weapons and capable missiles the DPRK promised to destroy its opponents. A few years ago the North circulated a video purporting to show the planned destruction of New York City. Brinkmanship long has been the chief hallmark of North Korean policy.

Moreover, there is no evidence that the North's Supreme Leader is blind, ignorant, or suicidal, even though he is calculating, cruel, and ruthless. But so far he has played a weak hand well. He succeeded his father in December 2011 when just shy of his 28<sup>th</sup> birthday. Surrounded by experienced, tough, and older associates of his father, he out-maneuvered them all, even executing some 140 top officials, including his uncle and supposed mentor.

Kim's byungjin policy, essentially "parallel development" of both the economy and nuclear weapons, so far has succeeded. Far more than his father he has pursued economic reform, with positive results which I observed while visiting the capital in June. In fact, the Bank of [South] Korea reports that 2016 saw the North's fastest growth in 17 years. (Overall the DPRK remains poor, especially the countryside, where those of dubious ideological reliability are contained.) Moreover, nuclear and missile developments proceed faster than ever. Kim clearly prefers his virgins in this world rather than the next, and thus can be deterred.

Nor is the regime's desire for nukes and missiles evidence of insanity. (The fact that a political system is criminal does not mean that it is irrational.) The DPRK once matched South Korea but over the last half century has fallen dramatically behind: the Republic of Korea possesses about 40 times the GDP and twice the population of the North. The ROK is technologically advanced, integrated into the international system, beneficiary of abundant economic and diplomatic support, and, most important, backed by the globe's super/hyperpower.

In Pyongyang North Korean officials denounced Washington's "hostile policy," backed by "military threats" and "nuclear threats." All of which is true, though, of course, the U.S. responded to the DPRK's own "hostile" behavior. The U.S. intervened to defend the Republic of Korea after the 1950 North Korean invasion and would have liberated the entire peninsula had China not entered the conflict. Gen. Douglas MacArthur then advocated using nuclear weapons, a threat also employed by the incoming Eisenhower administration to "encourage" Beijing to conclude an armistice.

Once that agreement was reached, the U.S. forged a "Mutual Defense" treaty (in practice it runs only one way, of course) with the South and maintained a garrison, backed by nuclear weapons on the peninsula (since withdrawn), joint military exercises with the South, and ample reinforcements nearby. Such measures obviously threatened the North Korean regime. Ironically, the end of the Cold War enhanced the danger facing Pyongyang. First Moscow and then Beijing opened diplomatic relations with South Korea, while the U.S. and Japan continued to isolate the DPRK, leaving the latter truly alone, without any real allies or even friends, other than fellow impoverished but brutal hellholes such as Cuba.

Moreover, after the demise of the Soviet Union America no longer restrained itself militarily. Indeed, no nation has used force more often over the last three decades. Washington ousted governments in Panama, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya; threatened an invasion to overthrow Haiti's government; sought to capture de facto rulers in Somalia; dismantled Serbia; and backed the overthrow of Syria's Bashar al-Assad. Washington used non-military means to support "color revolutions" in Georgia and Ukraine and later encourage a street revolution against the latter's elected president. Kim has good reason to be paranoid, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's protestations to the contrary notwithstanding.

At the time Pyongyang took special note of America's and Europe's willingness to take advantage of Libyan Muammar Khadafy's weakness and enable his ouster by armed opponents. This after he was rewarded by Washington and feted in Europe for trading away his government's missiles and nukes and battling al-Qaeda. So much for Washington keeping its deals.

Nuclear weapons obviously offer North Korea a useful tool to defend itself in a dangerous and uncertain part of the world. Even China is at best a frenemy and Kim wants to rule an independent nation, not a de facto Chinese province. Nukes also give Pyongyang status, enable neighborly extortion, and please the military. While alone they provide local deterrence, Kim no doubt fears the attitude expressed by a shockingly callous Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who assumed the U.S. could freely attack the North since the conflict would be in Northeast Asia, "not here in America." Long-range missiles would allow North Korea to share the slaughter with the U.S. homeland.

What should Washington do?

- President Trump should stop competing in the crazed rhetoric contest. Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un shouts to get noticed and divert attention from his country's many weaknesses. America's president needs do neither. To the contrary, by doing so the U.S. leader demeans himself and his country.
- The U.S. should begin phasing out both its security treaty with and military garrison in the ROK. Seoul long has been able to defend itself. America's defense commitment is what puts this nation in the middle of one of the world's worst geopolitical hotspots. Protecting prosperous and populous friends is not worth the risk of nuclear war.
- Washington should sit down with the People's Republic of China, acknowledge its interests, and offer to make a deal. For instance, propose an American military withdrawal from the Korean peninsula in exchange for greater Chinese pressure on the North. The U.S. cannot expect the PRC to drop its only ally and aid American attempts at regional containment because that's what Washington desires.
- American policymakers should consider whether encouraging South Korean and Japanese development of countervailing nuclear arsenals is better than maintaining an increasingly frayed "nuclear umbrella" over Washington's allies. Frankly, neither Seoul nor Tokyo is worth risking the loss of Los Angeles or Seattle. There are no good solutions to a nuclear DPRK. Further proliferation might be the best "second best" answer available.
- Negotiate with North Korea. Talking would reduce the sense of threat felt by the North. Dialogue also would explore areas of

potential agreement even if Pyongyang refuses to consider abandoning its nukes and missiles. For instance, a verifiable freeze would be uncomfortable, but the U.S. and world would be better off facing a North with a stable nuclear arsenal of 20 weapons than one of, say, 100 weapons and growing, which some analysts fear could be the case in just a few more years.

Despite the global freak-out over the war of words between Supreme Leader Kim and President Trump, there is good news. Pyongyang wants to avoid, not wage, war against America. (Hopefully the Trump administration also wants to avoid a conflict.) If the U.S. was not “over there,” seemingly threatening military action and regime change, the DPRK almost certainly would ignore Washington. But as long as the U.S. is present militarily, prepared to intervene in any conflict, and ever-ready to oust offending governments for any number of reasons, the Kim regime will look to deterrence as its only sure defense.

Peace should remain America’s overriding objective regarding the Korean peninsula. That would most likely be achieved by Washington calming its rhetoric and stepping back militarily. If President Trump really wants to put America first, he will move the U.S. out of the firing line in Korea and Northeast Asia.

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