



How to minimize NK threat

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Newly elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in visited Washington. The result could have been a tense meeting with President Donald Trump. Moon mixes skepticism of the THAAD anti-missile system with support for dialogue with the North.

Since taking office the South Korean leader has tried to minimize perceived differences with America, claiming that his views are consistent with President Trump's policy of "maximum pressure and maximum engagement." But while Moon pragmatically tempered his views during the recent campaign, he is an avid supporter of the so-called Sunshine Policy toward North Korea.

Indeed, President Trump reportedly was angered by Moon's criticism of THAAD, which the former declared warranted a billion dollar payment to America. Worse, administration officials suggested the possibility of military strikes on the North, anathema to most South Koreans.

The central challenge for the alliance is North Korea, which has continued to pursue ever longer-range missiles and more sophisticated nuclear weapons. Unfortunately, Washington and Seoul are bereft of useful ideas on how to convince the Democratic People's Republic of Korea to disarm.

Certainly not negotiation. I visited Pyongyang in June. Officials reaffirmed that the DPRK does not intend to surrender its nuclear weapons. North Koreans blamed America's "hostile policy" and promised to match "nuke with nuke." There was not the slightest hint that the North might be willing to bargain away weapons assembled at great cost and risk.

No doubt North Korea has multiple reasons for acquiring nukes. They provide the regime with international status, create a useful tool for extortion, and cement military loyalty to the Kim dynasty.

Still, North Koreans made an impassioned claim of self-defense. They complained that they had faced American nuclear threats going back to the 1950s, noted Washington's penchant for regime change, and cited ongoing threats, including bomber overflights and annual military exercises.

Of course, this account ignores Pyongyang's behavior. Nevertheless, given the fate of Moammar Ghadafi, Kim Jong-un would be foolish to rely on Secretary Rex Tillerson's assurances that the Trump administration does not seek regime change.

What if America's "hostile policy" ended, I asked? The North would consider joining the other

nuclear powers if they yielded their nukes as well, I was told. Obviously, if there are talks involving Pyongyang, they won't begin with a DPRK commitment to disarm.

Military action isn't a viable option either. Sen. Lindsey Graham felt reassured since, as he told NBC: "It would be terrible but the war would be over [there], wouldn't be here." The conflict would not "hit America." In fact, the U.S. would be involved and the casualties would be high. Moreover, the war would "hit" South Korea very hard—likely leaving the capital of Seoul in ruins.

Nor are sanctions likely to do the trick. China isn't prepared to join in, since the U.S. has yet to give Beijing a convincing reason to effectively hand over its one ally in East Asia. Anyway, a North Korean collapse would create its own set of international dangers. Moreover, the regime might resist and survive: it endured the starvation deaths of a half million or more people in the late 1990s.

Which leaves the U.S. and ROK to confront a growing North Korean nuclear threat. Once the DPRK develops a reasonably accurate ICBM, the U.S. will be risking Los Angeles, Seattle, and perhaps much more to protect Seoul.

It would be better if Washington and South Korea acknowledged the North's nuclear status and sought to make a deal freezing the DPRK's missile and nuclear programs. The U.S. and allied states can manage a world in which North Korea has 20 nuclear weapons and limited delivery options. If the latter's arsenal expands to, say, 100, along with the range of its missiles, the North's potential for harm will grow exponentially.

Offering to suspend annual military exercises, previously suggested by the DPRK, is one option. Proposing negotiations over a peace treaty and phased withdrawal of U.S. military forces from the South is another. Halting North Korean missile and nuclear development is worth the price. Along the way the allies should explore what Beijing would require to take a more active role.

There are no good options for dealing with the DPRK. Which suggests setting more modest objectives while looking toward a longer-term transformation of the North Korean state. The sooner the allies face nuclear reality in Northeast Asia, the better.

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