

Washington should step back in Korea

Doug Bandow

August 13, 2017

President Donald Trump has put all of Asia and much of the world on edge by going mano-a-mano with "Supreme Leader" Kim Jong-un. The former blusterer like the frightened head of an international micro-state instead of the representative of the world's most important and powerful nation.

There is no contest between the two countries. America's GDP last year was almost \$19 trillion, around 650 times that of the North. Washington spends upwards of 100 times as much as Pyongyang on the military. Only a few of America's 1411 nuclear warheads would be necessary to turn Kim Jong-un's kingdom into a proverbial "lake of fire."

Of course, critical to deterrence is whether Kim recognizes the actual balance of power. But the near hysterical language with which Pyongyang addresses the world is not new. Brinkmanship long has been North Korean policy.

Moreover, there is no evidence that the North's "Supreme Leader" is blind, ignorant, or suicidal. In fact, so far he has played a weak hand well, consolidating power despite being only 27 when he succeeded his father in December 2011.

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 Pyongyang in June.

Moreover, nuclear and missile developments proceed faster than ever. Kim clearly prefers his virgins in this world rather than the next.

Nor is the regime's desire for nukes and missiles evidence of insanity. The DPRK has fallen dramatically behind: the Republic of Korea, which 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. The U.S. then forged a "Mutual Defense" treaty with the South.

Ironically, the end of the Cold War enhanced the danger facing Pyongyang. First Moscow and Beijing opened diplomatic relations with South Korea.

Moreover, after the demise of the Soviet Union America no longer restrained itself militarily, routinely engaging in regime change, most recently in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya. Kim has good reason to be paranoid.

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.

Nukes also give Pyongyang status, enable neighborly extortion, and please the military. Long-range missiles have the additional benefit of allowing North Korea to share the slaughter with the U.S. homeland.

What should Washington do?

- 1) President Trump should stop competing in the crazed rhetoric contest. Kim Jong-un shouts to get attention and divert attention from his country's many weaknesses. America's president needs do neither.
- 2) The U.S. should begin phasing out both its security treaty with and military garrison in the ROK. Protecting prosperous and populous friends is not worth the risk of nuclear war.
- 3) 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.
- 4) 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. There are only "second best" solutions.
- 5) The U.S. should negotiate with North Korea. Washington and Pyongyang should explore areas of potential agreement, such as a nuclear freeze, even if Pyongyang refuses to abandon its nukes and missiles.

There is good news. Pyongyang wants to avoid, not wage, war against America. (Hopefully the Trump administration also wants to forestall any conflict.) But the Kim regime looks to deterrence as its only sure defense.

Peace should remain America's overriding objective regarding the Korean peninsula. President

Trump should mix diplomacy with deterrence.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea."