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Perhaps It's Time For South Korea To Go Nuclear

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North Korea's Kim Jong-un plays the international game with style. He sent his sister, Kim Yo-jong, to the Olympic games in the Republic of Korea. And he extended an invitation for South Korea's President Moon Jae-in to visit Pyongyang. It's impossible for the ROK leader to say no.

Unsurprisingly, the Trump administration isn't happy. Even before the North's dramatic move, Vice President Mike Pence demonstrated his great displeasure at the North Koreans' presence in the Olympics, which he called a "charade." Then, he refused to stand when Pyongyang's athletes entered the stadium and studiously ignored the presence of not only Kim Yo-jong but also the North's nominal head of state Kim Yong-nam (no relation). Had Pence approached them with his hand outstretched he would have grabbed the initiative for the Trump administration. But instead he refused to even glance in the North Koreans' direction, as if doing so would make them disappear.

Of course, there is no reason to believe that Kim Jong-un has decided to mend his evil ways and abandon nuclear weapons, respect human rights, hold elections, and accept unconditional reunification. But the North Koreans really didn't use their participation "to paper over the truth about their regime, which oppresses its own people & threatens other nations," as Pence tweeted before leaving for Korea. After all, lots of thuggish dictators, including several proclaimed to be "friends" by President Trump, sent delegations, without much affecting their reputations.

Pyongyang's grand gestures were aimed less at Seoul and more at the Trump administration. After all, the two Koreas have fielded joint sports teams before, most recently in the 2014 Asia Games, without lasting impact. Moreover, the last two leftish ROK presidents held summits with Kim Jong-il, the father of the present ruler—many missile and nuclear tests ago. Along the way Pyongyang collected some \$10 billion in aid and other revenue as part of the "Sunshine Policy," without yielding peace. The regime is focused on self-preservation.

Officials in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea told me they had no intention of being "swallowed" by the South. But South Korea does not threaten Pyongyang's security. Last summer my North Korean interlocutors dismissed the ROK as a "puppet" of America. In truth,

while the South is a vibrant democracy with one of the world's largest industrial economies, it has subcontracted its security to the U.S. The American military even has operational control over South Korean forces in wartime. And all the "big guns" are in Washington's hands.

Moreover, the advanced U.S. military position—roughly 30,000 troops stationed on the peninsula, a Marine Expeditionary Force on Okinawa targeted for a Korean conflict, and much more within reach via sea or air—threatens more than retaliation for another North Korean invasion. Washington has demonstrated its willingness to oust foreign governments at its pleasure. Even without Seoul's consent the U.S. could start a preventive war.

Hence North Korea's push to create not only nuclear weapons, but missiles to strike America. In Muammar Khadafy's final moments he might have thought, if only I hadn't given up my missiles and nukes. The North's Kim seems unlikely to ever utter those words, whatever happens to his rule. For the DPRK, talking to the ROK is usually a waste of time, other than attempting to shake free a few loose won.

But not in this case. President Trump's belligerent behavior made the otherwise meaningless gesture worthwhile. The Kim regime is looking for some insurance until it creates a nuclear deterrent which is unquestionably secure. In this way the president probably deserves, as he shamelessly demanded, credit for Pyongyang's softening. But the North offered only process, an inter-Korean summit, not substance, acceptance of denuclearization. Indeed, the purpose of offering the former was to avoid the latter.

And the Olympics gambit was successful, in part because it pushed President Moon back to his left-wing roots. After reaching agreement with Pyongyang on the Olympics, he declared: "We are facing a precious opportunity to resolve the North Korean nuclear issues in a peaceful manner and open up the path of establishing peace on the Korean peninsula now." At Moon's request, the U.S. reluctantly agreed to postpone military exercises with South Korean forces. Pleasant video of smiling North Koreans, and especially the attractive Kim Yo-jang, filled the South's airwaves. The North even raised questions about "dependence on the outsiders," meaning the U.S. And talk of military options at least temporarily faded.

In return, Pyongyang offered *the prospect* of fewer provocations and better relations. Again. Said Kim Jong-un in his New Year's Day address: "The South Korean authorities should respond positively to our sincere efforts for a detente." Of course, there was no mention of ending missile or nuclear developments, let alone eliminating existing arsenals. The North's objective is not to surrender its sovereignty, but to get Seoul to assert its sovereignty against Washington. Since none of Pyongyang's attitudes or positions have changed, there is no reason to believe that it is willing to offer anything more of value.

Which makes North Korea's Olympics participation, by normal terms, a bad deal for the allies. After all, so far Pyongyang has given up nothing. But "normal" means that Korean policy is set in Washington. That was inevitable so long as the ROK was essentially helpless, unable to defend itself against the DPRK and its allies.

But that world long ago disappeared. South Korea has taken its place among the first rank of nations. Yet its security remains in the hands of American presidents, most of whom know little of the Koreas and have no incentive to sacrifice U.S. interests on the ROK's behalf. Today that means an aggressive, coercive approach, topped by threats of war. And it is based on the belief that any conflict would occur, as Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) coldly put it, "over there," meaning the Koreas.

Which is why North Korea's Olympic politics actually is a win for Americans, if not the Trump administration. First is creating a communication channel which might also encourage a U.S.-North Korean dialogue. Axios reported that National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster believed "resumed communications by the North Koreans are diversions and don't have any effect on its determined pursuit of nuclear weapons." However, President Trump said "I would love to see them take it beyond the Olympics." Indeed, "at the appropriate time, we'll get involved." Hopefully he is serious.

Second, the North Korean gambit makes a U.S. attack less likely. President Trump could act over the objection of Seoul and without using any American forces based in the ROK. However, doing so would be less effective and more dangerous, especially if the U.S. made no preparations for North Korean retaliation. And it likely would rupture the alliance.

Third is to channel South Korean nationalism in a positive direction. Katina Adams, a State Department spokeswoman, said "We are in close contact with the Republic of Korea about our unified response to North Korea." However, Washington analysts worry about the North driving a "wedge" between the U.S. and South Korea. In fact, the president said "if I were them I would try."

Continuing positive signs from the North could encourage the Moon administration to step back from President Trump's "maximum pressure" policy. For instance, during last year's presidential campaign candidate Moon proposed restarting the Kaesong industrial park, which likely would run afoul of sanctions passed after its closure.

Such a step might be unwise in Washington's view, but the Korean challenge most directly affects South Korea. Seoul should take the lead.

Keeping the ROK dependent on America is in neither country's interest. Of course, the bilateral relationship goes back more than seven decades. The vice president waxed enthusiastic: "the sons and daughters of our two nations have stood together in defense of our most cherished values." However, younger South Koreans remember military dictatorships rather than the Korean War, and are more likely to bridle at the costs of dependence.

Indeed, though the ROK benefits from U.S. defense subsidies, Seoul could pay a very high price for that backing. And much more than host nation support, at issue in upcoming burden-sharing negotiations. The ROK could find itself dragged into a catastrophic conflict by its ally. With the potential for mass death and destruction. Washington's hostile reaction to a possible South-North détente should remind South Koreans about the dangers of placing their security in the hands of a self-interested superpower half a world away.

At the same time, Washington is coming to realize that guaranteeing the South's security is not cheap. The U.S. soon might find its homeland under nuclear attack if it comes to the ROK's aid in a war with the North. While the South is an attractive friend, the relationship does not warrant risking the incineration of one or more major American cities.

There is much on which the U.S. and ROK can and should cooperate on. But the South, with 45 times the GDP and twice the population of the North, is well able to defend itself. Then its future would not be subject to Washington's whims. And if the North moves ahead with its missile and nuclear programs, it might be better for the ROK to create a countervailing arsenal than expect the U.S. to maintain a nuclear umbrella that holds Americans hostage. At the very least, the mere mention of such a possibility might get Beijing's attention and spur greater action against the North.

There is no simple answer to the challenge posed by a nuclear North Korea. But the starting point of any Korea policy remains preventing an unnecessary conflict. And the North's participation in the Olympics has, however imperfectly, slowed the momentum to war. For that Americans should be thankful.

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