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It's time to engage North Korea

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A new U.S. administration has taken office, so a new provocation has been staged by North Korea. And just as predictably, America and its allies have denounced North Korea for defying "the international community." Washington is filled with chatter about the need to do something to demonstrate resolve and leadership.

It's a foolish game that Pyongyang enjoys. Why do U.S. officials continue to play?

Rushing to the United Nations Security Council to discuss the supposedly grave threat to world peace will be of no use. After all, even Washington treats the judgment of that supposedly hallowed body as a matter of convenience.

Worse, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea almost certainly thrives on the gnashing of teeth that inevitably follows its misbehavior. To the extent that North Korea desires international attention and hopes to acquire leverage against its antagonists, such an adverse reaction is gratifying.

But the biggest problem is Washington's determination to demonstrate its impotence. Precisely what will the Trump administration do in response? What can it do in response?

Almost certainly nothing.

The United States faces the same unpalatable choices as usual. Military strikes would be a dangerous gamble, based on the hope that North Korea would not retaliate and trigger the very conflict Washington has helped deter for more than six decades.

U.N. sanctions were twice enhanced last year after nuclear tests, only after painful negotiations with China, and have had no evident effect on North Korean behavior. The next step would be to target Chinese entities dealing with the country, which would almost certainly make Beijing less willing to cooperate with an administration already seen as both hostile and unpredictable.

Finally, there's negotiation. The president suggested the possibility while running for president, but Pyongyang is unlikely to disarm.

Moreover, even if North Korea were inclined to negotiate seriously, in the past the U.S. has refused to put on the table sufficient incentives, including a peace treaty, diplomatic recognition or troop withdrawals.

In which case U.S. officials would do better downplaying North Korea's latest actions and consider revising policy toward Pyongyang.

No doubt, North Korea's emergence as a potentially significant military power is undesirable. What to do?

First, recognize that North Korea does not threaten the U.S. That is, leader Kim Jong Un may be evil, but he is not stupid. The regime won't attack America because it would result in North Korea's destruction.

Rather, Pyongyang desires to deter Washington from attacking, whether the goal of such an attack would be to achieve regime change or to back South Korea in an inter-Korean conflict. To the extent that North Korea's weapons might be used against American bases in Asia or the U.S. homeland, it is only because Washington has chosen to remain militarily entangled in the Korean Peninsula.

Second, there is no cause for a continued U.S. security commitment or force presence in the South. The Republic of Korea far outstrips its northern antagonist in every measure of national power except military, and the latter is a matter of choice, not necessity. South Korea should take over responsibility for its own defense.

Third, Washington needs to contemplate what policy to take in response to a nuclear North. The U.S. could continue to maintain a so-called nuclear umbrella over the South.

On the other hand, that creates the possibility, however slight, of American involvement in a nuclear exchange over interests that are modest at best. It might be better for the South to develop a countervailing deterrent. Indeed, that possibility (which could lead to a Japanese bomb) might be the shock necessary to induce greater Chinese pressure on the North.

Fourth, the U.S. needs to persuade China to do more. That means addressing Beijing's interests — its fear of the impact of a North Korean collapse and resulting reunification that would strengthen an American "containment" strategy against China.

Fifth, the U.S. should engage the North. Regular if modest contact at least would offer a small window into North Korea. Washington needs to reduce the perceived threat presented by the U.S.

Moreover, Beijing long has insisted that Washington needs to improve relations with the North as the basis for denuclearizing the peninsula. Only by making such an effort is the U.S. likely to win greater Chinese cooperation.

The best U.S. strategy would be to downplay the North Korean threat, step back militarily, offer China incentives to step forward and engage Pyongyang. The status quo hasn't worked. It's time to try a new approach.

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