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Sanctions Haven't Worked and Bombs Would be a Disaster: Time to Talk to North Korea

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A new U.S. administration took office, so a new provocation (or two or three) was staged by Pyongyang. Equally predictably, America and its allies denounced North Korea for defying “the international community.” And Washington was filled with chatter about the need to do something to demonstrate resolve and leadership.

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

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has spent most of its nearly 70 years acting as the outsider. Even during the Cold War it played the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China against each other. Today the DPRK and Beijing are more frenemies than allies.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that Pyongyang has little respect for “the international community,” a meaningless construct used to back whatever position the speaker happens to hold. Rushing to the UN Security Council to discuss the supposedly grave threat to world peace will be of no use. After all, even the U.S. treats the judgment of that supposedly hallowed body as a matter of convenience—useful when backing American policy, as in the case of North Korea, but of no account when at odds with Washington's approach, such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Worse, the DPRK almost certainly thrives on the wailing and gnashing of teeth that inevitably follow North Korean misbehavior. To the extent that the North desires international attention and hopes to acquire leverage against its antagonists, most notably South Korea, Japan, and the U.S., such an adverse reaction is gratifying. Having far away Europe complain about the threat to

world peace is a pleasant extra, like a glass of cognac after a fine meal. What other nation otherwise of no account is able to win such notice around the globe?

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

UN 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 North, which would further strain relations with the PRC. That would almost certainly make Beijing less willing to cooperate with a Washington 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, especially after seeing the U.S. and Europeans seize their opportunity to oust Libya's Moammar Kaddafi after he gave up his nuclear and missile programs.

Moreover, even if the DPRK was inclined to negotiate seriously, in the past the U.S. has refused to put on the table incentives of sufficient interest to the North, including a peace treaty, diplomatic recognition, and troop withdrawals. Kim Jong-un appears more interested than his father and grandfather in spurring economic development, but he seems no less committed to acquiring a nuclear arsenal and missile force.

In which case U.S. officials would do better simply shutting up for a change. Better instead to downplay the DPRK's latest actions and consider revising policy toward Pyongyang.

No doubt, North Korea's emergence as a potentially significant military power is undesirable. But it is a reality. The North's nuclear and missile programs can't be wished away. What to do?

First, recognize that the DPRK does not threaten the U.S. That is, Kim Jong-un may be evil, but he is not stupid. The regime won't attack America, which would result in North Korea's destruction. Rather, Pyongyang desires to deter Washington from attacking the North, whether to achieve regime change or back the South 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. Otherwise, the DPRK would have no interest in America.

Second, there's no cause for a continued U.S. security commitment or force presence in the South. The ROK 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. America can ill afford to forever subsidize prosperous and populous allies.

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. Rather than risk American cities to protect Seoul, it might be better for the ROK to develop a counter-vailing 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 the PRC to do more. And that means addressing Beijing's interests—its fear of the impact of a North Korean collapse and resulting reunification that strengthens an American "containment" strategy against China. The PRC won't act against its own interests. Washington needs to make Chinese cooperation worth Beijing's while.

Fifth, the U.S. should engage the North. That doesn't mean liking the regime, endorsing Kim Jong-un's rule, or ignoring human rights violations. However, Washington routinely has diplomatic relations with adversaries, including the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The fact that the latter posed a severe military threat to America made such contact *even more important*.

Refusing to exchange diplomats makes no sense. Regular if modest contact at least would offer a small window into the North. Moreover, Washington needs to reduce the perceived threat presented by the U.S. The DPRK has several reasons for wanting to build missiles and nukes, but the most persuasive is defense: how else to deter the hostile global superpower from using its vast military?

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. Indeed, there would be no better evidence of North Korea's malign intent than to make an attractive offer to Pyongyang which was ignored or rejected.

If the DPRK is the gravest security threat facing America, as some have claimed, that demonstrates how secure the U.S. is. Today the North is able to attack only those forces Washington chooses to put in harm's way. And it is only because the U.S. does so that North Korea has any incentive to attack. Finally, Pyongyang would do so only as a last resort if Washington intervened against the North.

Thus, the best U.S. strategy would be to exercise "leadership," but of a responsible sort. Washington should downplay the 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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