

# The Japan Times

## Time for U.S. to rethink its North Korea policy

Doug Bandow

February 16, 2017

In North Korea, Kim Jong Un appears to rule supreme. There is no talk of collective leadership, competing coalitions, or personal limitations. Most of those at the political summit five years ago when his father died are gone — dead, purged or missing.

Kim has done what many of us thought impossible: take and keep control in one of the world's most dangerous political snake pits. His father spent far less time preparing the way for Kim than his grandfather had for his father. And Pyongyang was filled with party apparatchiks, military officers, and skilled technocrats who had waited more than six decades to supersede the Kim dynasty.

But the young Kim, recently believed to have turned 33, skillfully and sometimes brutally purged the various mentors and minders chosen by his father. And while elite dissatisfaction is evident from occasional high level defections, nothing suggests sufficient opposition to oust Kim or overthrow the system.

His dress, hair style and girth mimic his grandfather more than his father. And he may prove to be more successful than either of them.

Kim Il Sung founded the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, but when he died his country was otherwise backward and headed toward crisis. Under Kim Jong Il state authority withered as the regime proved unable to feed its people.

Kim Jong Un is pushing his "Byungjin" strategy, both economic development and nuclear weapons. Despite international opprobrium and sanctions, even by the North's one-time allies, Beijing and Moscow, he appears to be succeeding. Missile and nuclear tests continue, suggesting that Pyongyang has made greater progress than foreign experts had expected. By some estimates he could have 50 to 100 nuclear weapons by 2020.

The economy also is growing, perhaps by two or three percent a year. The base remains very low, almost nonexistent in many rural areas. Nevertheless, the turnaround is dramatic from the famine of only a couple decades ago.

Which suggests that the Trump administration will find itself facing an ugly reality. First, a relatively secure Kim in control of a reasonably stable North Korean state. Second, a slightly more prosperous North Korea able to give the nomenklatura enough material goods to maintain elite commitment to the regime and loyalty to the Kim dynasty. Third, a military capable of

striking U.S. bases and eventually the American homeland, creating a genuine nuclear deterrent to Washington.

What to do? More of the same is likely to deliver more of the same results.

Not negotiating has not slowed the North's military activities. But negotiations appeared to have little more effect. And today virtually no one believes that Pyongyang is inclined to voluntarily yield up its nuclear program, irrespective of the incentives offered.

While sanctions could be further stiffened, without Chinese enforcement they will not cripple the regime or force it to change course. Moreover, in the unlikely event that Beijing agreed to something akin to "bone-crunching" penalties, Kim still might resist, with extraordinary hardship for average North Koreans and the potential of a catastrophic collapse with equally catastrophic consequences.

President-elect Donald Trump wants Beijing to solve the North Korea "problem." Unfortunately, he assumes China has more influence than it does in Pyongyang. In any case, China has no incentive to promote regime change for America's benefit, which would risk a North Korean implosion and ultimately a reunited Korea allied with America hosting U.S. troops on the Chinese border. A deal would have to be struck, and that would require American and South Korean concessions.

Military strikes remain an option but would be a wild gamble. The great achievement of America's military presence for the past six decades has been to prevent conflict from occurring.

Necessary is a new approach. Propose negotiations, including bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang, over more limited issues, such as restrictions on nuclear activities and other confidence-building steps, and diplomatic recognition.

Offer a benefits package that addresses the North's security as well as economic requirements. Develop a common front with China against the North that serves both America's and China's interests. Prepare tougher targeted sanctions. And contemplate how to deal with a nuclear North Korea if the foregoing fails to halt Pyongyang's plans.

North Korea is likely to pose one of the most difficult challenges for the Trump administration. Sloganeering won't prove nearly as useful as president as it did as presidential candidate.

*Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute He is the author of "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World."*