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Donald Trump Should Rethink Asia Policy

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With North Korea mixing missile tests with an assassination via nerve gas and China launching an economic strike against South Korea for joining America's anti-missile program, Asia is becoming increasingly volatile. Unfortunately, the Trump administration's policy appears to be stoking the flames.

When presented with a Chinese proposal for a North Korean nuclear and missile freeze in exchange for U.S. and South Korean cancellation of ongoing military exercises, UN Ambassador Nikki R. Haley declared that "We have to see some sort of positive action by North Korea before we can take them seriously." The threat of additional negative steps should be reason enough for contact. However, South Korea's UN ambassador, Cho Tae-yul, declared: "This is not the time for us to talk about freezing or dialogue with North Korea."

If not now, when? And if not dialogue, then what?

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is heading to Asia for talks "to try to generate a new approach to North Korea," according to a State Department spokesman. What might that be? Amb. Haley repeated a bromide from the past: "I can tell you we're not ruling anything out, and we're considering every option."

However, the implied military threat will only drive the North toward greater commitment to creating a deterrent while unsettling the South, which would bear the brunt of any ensuing conflict. Such a strike would be a wild gamble, assuming that the U.S. could take out the essentials of the North's nuclear program while Pyongyang exercised restraint in its response. Amb. Haley described North Korea's Young Marshal Kim Jong-un as "non-rational." If she believes that, why would she assume he would passively sit through a U.S. attack?

What are the other options? More sanctions, almost every observer says. But so far Beijing has carefully limited the impact of economic restrictions to prevent a crisis in the North. Sec. Tillerson shouldn't waste his time if he plans to travel thousands of miles to tell the People's Republic of China what it "should" do.

Chinese officials know what America wants, but so far are not willing to make a geopolitical present of their only ally. If he really wants to promote “a new approach,” he needs to be prepared to negotiate with the PRC, addressing their concerns about the prospect of a messy collapse of the North and hostile reunification landing U.S. forces on their border. That is, the sort of deal-making favored by President Donald Trump.

In fact, Beijing tossed the ball back into Washington’s court by recently cutting off North Korean coal imports to China. The PRC long has pressed the U.S. to make a generous offer to Pyongyang to reverse the “hostile” environment which Chinese officials believe to be the cause of the North’s missile and nuclear programs. Never mind whether Secretary Tillerson or anyone else in Washington agrees American policy is to blame. If Washington wants China’s cooperation, the U.S. needs to give as well as take.

Indeed, why reject the nuke freeze for military maneuvers offer? The North made a similar proposal two years ago, only to be rejected. Maybe the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea isn’t serious, but the only way to find out is to accept, forcing the DPRK to say yes or no. Dropping the maneuvers would be a small concession—South Korea long ago should have taken over its conventional defense long ago—while backing up the PRC would allow Washington to request greater support from China.

As it stands, the residents of Zhongnanhai will remember that Washington blocked Beijing’s proposal to reduce tensions. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi, who promoted the freeze deal, observed: “To resolve the nuclear issue, we have to walk on both legs ... which means not just implementing sanctions, but also restarting talks.” If the U.S. won’t accept the second, China isn’t likely to offer the first.

In which case some analysts boldly propose sanctioning Chinese financial institutions which deal with the North. Secretary Tillerson even proposed compelling the PRC to enforce sanctions as demanded by Washington, whatever that would entail. However, neither China’s leaders nor its people are inclined to accept foreign dictates.

Indeed, the explosive Chinese reaction against South Korea’s participation in the THAAD anti-missile system demonstrates nationalism’s power in the PRC. While the government has inflamed popular antagonism, the outrage is real. Social media demands for boycotts of South Korean products and performers reflect the Chinese public’s reach. U.S. officials might reflect back on America’s truculent behavior in the mid-1800s when facing challenges from Mexico, Great Britain, and others. If Washington’s demands upend the U.S.-China relationship, the impact would affect other important issues, including trade, territorial claims, and Taiwan.

Perhaps administration officials cannot see the world from Pyongyang’s and Beijing’s perspective. Amb. Haley declared of the North Koreans, “They’ve given us enough reason to think how irresponsible they are.” But why? Because Kim & Co. refuse to throw themselves at the feet of American officials asking for mercy from a government which has imposed regime change on small, effectively defenseless nations whenever convenient?

The Kim regime is evil. It is incautious, even reckless. But there is no evidence that the Young Marshal and his minions are mad, determined on self-destruction or global immolation. Indeed,

Washington's proclivity for military intervention has created a premium for potential adversaries to develop deterrents, as the North is doing. Which suggests the starting point for any modus vivendi should be, as Beijing suggests, reducing Pyongyang's feelings of insecurity.

That might not be enough, but the Kim regime is unlikely to voluntarily dismantle itself. This step also is necessary to win greater Chinese backing. The Trump administration has a unique opportunity to enlist the PRC as a partner in dealing with the North.

Beijing is frustrated: Kim the younger has ostentatiously ignored China's counsel and interests. The PRC is tired of being challenged to defend the indefensible, such as the very public and apparently quite irresponsible assassination of Kim Jong-nam with VX nerve agent. Chinese leaders also are irritated that North Korea has triggered U.S. and South Korean military steps which adversely affect the PRC, such as THAAD deployment.

However, Washington must negotiate with, not dictate to, Beijing if it hopes for Chinese cooperation. And that, in turn, requires a willingness to engage the DPRK. Success obviously is not assured, but failing to change policy almost certainly guarantees continued failure.

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