

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

How Joe Biden Can Avoid a Showdown with North Korea

Biden should pick up where Trump left off. And begin work, even before taking the oath of office, to forestall another crisis on the Korean peninsula. Otherwise, another crisis with Pyongyang might be just around the corner.

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Joe Biden will be America's next president. His victory is almost entirely due to the incumbent's constant missteps.

Absent COVID-19 Donald Trump would have been reelected. With a slightly more competent response to the epidemic, he would have triumphed. Had he been a slightly more decent and less obnoxious person, he would have won.

Even if you liked what Donald Trump did, it was hard not to wish him gone. The world of constant insult and invective was simply too much. That he nevertheless came so close to a second term is a testament to his rough appeal and Americans' widespread dissatisfaction with policies designed by elites for elites.

On foreign policy, the presumptive president-elect will be tempted to stick with his half-century-old uninspired, unimaginative, and inadequate playbook. What has always been must always seem to be his mantra. On Korea that suggests a possible continuation of the Obama policy of ignoring Pyongyang while embracing Seoul. The unsatisfactory outcome of those eight years was continuous North Korean missile and nuclear development.

More likely is a traditional outreach predicated upon the standard CVID doctrine: comprehensive, verifiable, irreversible denuclearization. However, this is a dead-end. Nothing is irreversible. And it is hard to imagine circumstances under which the North would be willing to yield its nuclear arsenal. Even otherwise clueless American officials should recognize that their behavior has made it impossible for Kim Jong-un and any successor regime to trust the U.S.

In Libya, Washington proved its willingness to double-cross a dictator naïve enough to believe sweet nothings whispered in his ear by American and European diplomats. With Iran Trump demonstrated that any president can toss aside previous presidential commitments. Kim is no naïf, despite his age, and has shown extraordinary ruthlessness when it comes to holding onto power. So much for being able to convince him to bare his neck to a future U.S. administration.

Biden did indicate that he would be willing to meet Kim with preconditions, but that likely means reaching a CVID agreement, which isn't likely. Even a more modest accord would take months to negotiate, assuming Kim is amenable. Biden will have to run a policy review and staff up the State Department and National Security Council. And he will have to move the issue forward amid a very full policy agenda: COVID-19, fiscal crisis, and economic growth, along with Iran, China, and much more.

Unfortunately, the North is unlikely to remain patient for weeks let alone months. There is widespread fear that Pyongyang is likely to respond to prospective inattention by testing the large missile unveiled at the military parade last month. How better to advance one's weapons and get Washington's attention at the same time? Such a step would reflect North Korea's brinkmanship strategy over the years, even decades. It would be difficult for even a preoccupied Joe Biden to ignore such a challenge.

Unfortunately, such a provocation would put the two governments at odds before their first contact. The incipient administration would face substantial pressure to retaliate, lest it appears weak from its very beginning. And such a response would make any improvement in relations, and especially sanctions relief as desired by Pyongyang, more difficult to achieve.

The Biden administration should seek to preclude such a development. It won't be easy, since the president-elect will have much on his plate. But with his triumph essentially certain he should send Kim a message, perhaps through a foreign policy adviser in a press interview. The gist: keep things low-key and we can make a deal.

Of course, rhetorical assurances won't long be enough for the North. However, Biden could follow with more specific assurances that would benefit both sides. The new president should explain that he believes 72 years of isolation is enough—he is ready to open liaison offices with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, with the expectation that they would eventually be turned into full embassies.

Moreover, he should indicate that on becoming president he would immediately eliminate the ban on travel to and from the North. Half of that would come through the summary repeal of Trump's so-called travel ban, mostly directed at Muslims around the world. The other half would be the State Department's ill-considered prohibition on traveling to the DPRK.

The current administration's strategy has been precisely wrong. Instead of seeking to isolate the North, the U.S. should be encouraging greater contact. Obviously, such exchanges are no panacea and do not guarantee the eventual collapse of the regime. However, they enable the U.S. to learn more about the North Korean system and create added incentives for further liberalization. Most important, the greater the number of foreigners visiting the North, the larger the chance of influencing younger North Koreans who will eventually determine the DPRK's future.

Once the Biden administration is installed and ready to negotiate, the president should indicate that these steps are intended to help address Kim's insistence that a better bilateral relationship precedes negotiations over nuclear weapons. Having demonstrated that Washington expects a

long-term improvement in relations, the new administration then should insist on movement toward denuclearization in exchange for sanctions relief and security guarantees.

However, the president-elect should indicate, if Kim goes with his baser instincts and makes provocation his bedrock policy, more, not less, pressure will be likely. The U.S. would restart military exercises with the South. And rather than consider sanctions relief, would review where controls could be further tightened. The latter, Biden should observe, would be in neither the North Korean government's nor people's interest.

Maintaining the opening pioneered by Trump is in a Biden administration's and, more important, America's interest. There was at least a possibility of full denuclearization a quarter century ago under the Agreed Framework had the Republican Congress not failed to appropriate funds needed to implement the pact. Once the North built an extensive nuclear arsenal backed by multiple missile types, the price for even partial denuclearization undoubtedly had risen much higher, and that may be the most that is currently achievable. However, it is impossible to know what the North might accept without negotiating.

In this way, Biden also could use Korea to demonstrate that he does not intend to be a Trump mini-me. The current president's policy toward Iran appears to reflect his determination to repudiate everything done by the Obama administration, in this case, the latter's effort to do with Iran what Trump ultimately attempted to do with North Korea. Rather than reflexively reject every Trump policy, the incoming administration should look for what is good and expand it. Trump's outreach to Pyongyang is one such policy.

Such an approach would be a good strategy irrespective of politics. So far the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign has had exactly zero success: not one government targeted has come crawling to Washington offering to become the equivalent of a conquered nation. The North is unlikely to become the first. The possibility of a series of small deals offering sanctions relief likely is the best hope forward.

Presidential transitions usually are genteel affairs. Lame-duck employees are busy searching for their next job while newcomers look around while also pursuing their next position. No one knows how Donald Trump will comport himself during the interregnum. However, he will look more like the winner he claims to be if he cooperates with Biden.

And Biden will more likely be successful if he realizes how narrowly he won his victory. He has no time for triumphalism, especially when it comes to policy toward North Korea. He should pick up where Trump left off. And begin work, even before taking the oath of office, to forestall another crisis on the Korean peninsula.

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