

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Why Kim Jong-un Needs to Reach Out To South Korea

With each passing day of the Trump administration, the North's chances drop of reaching an agreement that delivers sanctions relief. The incoming Biden administration is likely to put the DPRK aside for later. Today Kim Jong-un's best chance for progress is to reinvigorate his government's ties with Seoul. Kim has shown the flexibility to shift course in the past. Is he capable of doing so again?

December 9, 2020

Doug Bandow

Unknown to Kim Jong-un at the time, January 20, 2017 gave him the best opportunity since his father's death in December 2011 to solidify his position. President Donald Trump took his oath of office that day. Although the latter spent his first year threatening Pyongyang with fire and fury, he then switched to unconventional diplomacy and summitry.

The collapse of the Hanoi summit caused Kim to drawback. Even North Korea's diplomats stopped talking with almost anyone anywhere. The effort to reach an agreement with the United States essentially ceased.

Alas, Trump was ill-equipped to do what was necessary to reach a more limited agreement that would promote arms control and be consistent with long-term denuclearization. Nevertheless, National Security Adviser John Bolton's departure in September 2019 gave Pyongyang another bite at the apple, so to speak.

Although the administration didn't officially drop its demand for an omnibus denuclearization deal, there were indications that U.S. officials were looking at more flexible approaches. Had the Democratic People's Republic of Korea pressed for a variant of the Yongbyon dismantlement proposal offered at Hanoi, an agreement might have been possible, however challenging the task. After all, reaching an accord with Trump was much more likely than getting one out of the Biden administration.

However, that opportunity has passed. There has been some dubious talk about a last-minute Trump initiative. That might appeal to the president. After all, he's still attempting to browbeat Iran into surrendering, convince the Saudis to recognize Israel, and get United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to make up with Qatar. A North Korea deal would cap his diplomatic record.

Nevertheless, no one would credit another paper pact that enunciated broad objectives without requiring practical steps. A real denuclearization deal of any sort would be much more complicated than the Abrahamic accords for mutual diplomatic recognition. Detailing even limited disarmament steps would require technical as well as diplomatic expertise; compliance and oversight would stretch over months if not years and require support from the incoming Biden administration. The current administration is incapable of fixing Korea by January 20. A distracted president attempting to overturn the election, a maladroit secretary of state capable of little more than issuing demands, dictates, and threats, and a temporary Pentagon team with little authority or knowledge mean no last-minute fix is forthcoming.

Knowing this, Kim would be unlikely to even try. Even if some agreement was reached, Trump cannot bind his successor. Although the incoming Biden administration might hesitate to overturn a pact which purported to advance denuclearization, the greater the commitments made by both sides the lesser the likelihood they would survive the political transition. With his dynasty at stake, Kim isn't likely to risk his prestige on a last-minute pact made by a discredited one-term president.

This means no solution will leave Kim's regime isolated and under sanctions for the coming months and perhaps longer. The incoming Biden administration will be focused on prodigious domestic crises: the coronavirus pandemic, economic recession, burgeoning debt, political division.

Even when his officials move on to foreign policy, they will have other priorities. The political calendar, namely Iran's June presidential election, will push that nation's nuclear deal to the fore. There are nuclear agreements with Russia to extend. And a threatening cold war with China to defuse. The president-elect also is a Europhile desperate to repair relations with Europe.

Moreover, like President Barack Obama, Biden seems likely to begin his work on the Korean peninsula by focusing on the South, in this case resolving outstanding issues such as deadlocked negotiations over host nation support. As a priority the DPRK will be dropped at the back of the line.

Nor would provocations—most obviously a test of the massive intercontinental ballistic missile unveiled at the North's October military parade—be a productive way to jump the queue. That would get the Biden team's attention, but not a positive response. And Beijing's newfound support for the Kim regime, after keeping the latter in deep freeze until spring 2018, might prove evanescent if Xi Jinping decides to seek a modus vivendi with the new American administration. Any cut in food and energy shipments while Pyongyang maintains its self-isolation to combat the threat of the coronavirus would put the North under enormous stress.

Which leaves the Republic of Korea and Moon Jae-in as North Korea's best option for making progress in lifting sanctions. Moon remains anxious to promote inter-Korean reconciliation, perhaps too anxious, given Pyongyang's cold reception after the collapse in U.S.-DPRK talks. Since early last year the North has treated Seoul's efforts with contempt, even blowing up the inter-Korean liaison office, constructed by South Korea, earlier this year.

The reason likely is North Korea's recognition that Washington has infantilized South Korea through the security alliance. Seoul can do little with the North without America's permission, even though the issue obviously matters much more to South Koreans. U.S. officials care little about what the South desires, which explains Sen. Lindsey Graham's otherwise inexplicable, even bizarre, dismissal of the likely consequences of American military strikes on North Korea. He indicated that they were of little concern in the U.S. since they would cause a war "over there" rather than "over here."

However, with a new administration about to take over in Washington, the relationship among allies is likely to shift. Biden is dedicated to pleasing and affirming alliance partners. That will include Moon. The Obama administration turned more hawkish toward the North under the influence of the more conservative (and both now imprisoned) South Korean Presidents Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. Moon could reverse the process, lobbying Washington to address the North by relaxing some sanctions that inhibit inter-Korean deals.

A more practical North Korean attitude was evident recently in its apology for the bizarre shooting death of a ROK maritime official, apparently killed by DPRK border guards following deadly coronavirus quarantine rules. Perhaps Kim realized that he was likely to lose his prime partner to the November election and needed a substitute. Moon enjoys a strong legislative majority but has less than two years before the next presidential election.

Pyongyang should use Kim's traditional New Year's address to reach out to the Moon government. Doing so would be pushing on an open door, given the South's persistent efforts to expand ties with the DPRK. Developing bilateral relations would enable the North to enlist Seoul to help engage the United States. Building on the inter-Korean agreements reached in 2018 would help convince Washington that North Korea was worth addressing. This would be the first step, if Kim is serious, to negotiating the first but important steps toward arms control and ultimately denuclearization.

With each passing day of the Trump administration, the North's chances drop of reaching an agreement that delivers sanctions relief. The incoming Biden administration is likely to put the DPRK aside for later. Today Kim Jong-un's best chance for progress is to reinvigorate his government's ties with Seoul. Kim has shown the flexibility to shift course in the past. Is he capable of doing so again?

Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute. A former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World.