



Kim Jong-un Isn't Crazy and China Doesn't Have a Solution

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Admittedly no one should expect linear thinking from President Donald Trump. Still, it was a bit jarring to hear him go from calling North Korea's leader Kim Jong-un a "pretty smart cookie" and "gentleman" who the president would be "honored" to meet to a "madman with nuclear weapons."

Not that the recent phone call with Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte was the first time President Trump questioned Kim's sanity. Last year candidate Trump said Kim was "like a maniac."

Thankfully President Trump indicated that he didn't want to use America's vastly more powerful military against Kim. The president still looks to Beijing for the answer: "I hope China solves the problem. They really have the means because a great degree of their stuff come[s] through China. But if China doesn't do it, we will do it." The president didn't explain what "it" might involve.

No one who pays attention to the Korean Peninsula believes that there is an easy answer to the challenge of a nuclear North Korea. But finding solutions will become even harder if the problem is misdiagnosed.

The North's leaders, starting with founder Kim Il-sung, appear to be eminently rational. His son, Kim Jong-il, wore platform shoes, had bouffant hair, donned oversized sunglasses and was particularly easy to caricature (think "Team America"). Nevertheless, Kim Il-sung, Kim Jong-il and descendent Kim Jong-un have skillfully wielded power, maintained control, deterred the United States and turned their small country into a Weltmacht of sorts.

The human cost has been great, but that's no different than in the Soviet Union and People's Republic of China. In those countries equally ruthless parties and leaders took control and made nations. The North's political system is sui generis, but its participants act in an understandable and predictable fashion.

Indeed, President Trump appeared to accurately assess Kim's skill in retaining power. Not a pretty sight, but so far effective. Even the execution of Kim's uncle and presumed assassination of his half-brother seem to have a cruel logic and likely reflect Kim's fear that China desired a more pliant ruler for the North.

Which means Washington must address why the Democratic People's Republic of Korea desires nuclear weapons. Those weapons offer prestige, yielding (however grudging) international respect. They offer opportunities for extortion. They generate political support from the military, a key domestic constituency. They boost the North's otherwise lackluster military capabilities, most notably creating a credible deterrent to any U.S. attempt at regime change. The latter looks more prescient in the aftermath of the ouster of Libya's Muammar el-Qaddafi, who negotiated away his missile and nuclear programs.

There is no reasoning with a genuine madman. But a discussion could be had with North Korean leadership over its nuclear plans. Admittedly, there's not much hope that Kim and his followers can be talked out of acquiring a sizeable nuclear arsenal—frankly, the benefits for the regime (if not the nation) are strong. However, objectives other than full denuclearization still would be valuable and might be achievable. But negotiation requires treating North Korea's leader as closer to “smart cookie” than “madman.”

The president's other questionable assumption is that China can “solve” the North Korean problem. What does the president mean by “solve?” No doubt, most American and South Korean analysts would like to see the North peacefully disarm and reunify with the Republic of Korea, disappearing into the mists of time. But that's a dream, not a solution. It could happen, of course, but isn't likely to happen. Making the perfect the enemy of the good won't do.

In fact, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told Pyongyang that the administration does not seek regime change. Nevertheless, Kim is likely to be skeptical, having seen Qaddafi's fate after the latter was feted in the West for disarming. Even if Kim happened to believe Tillerson, the latter cannot bind his successor. Another president might turn into the second coming of President George W. Bush, who famously tagged the North as a member of the “Axis of Evil,” said he “loathed” Kim Jong-il, and overthrew governments in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Ending North Korea's missile and nuclear programs presumably would be viewed as a grand victory. However, having come this far at such cost, and with little reason to trust the continuing beneficence of the U.S. government, Pyongyang is unlikely to agree absent extreme duress. Even the Trump administration appears to recognize that military force and no-go sanctions are the only options.

President Trump correctly observed that “a great degree of [North Korea's] stuff come[s] through China.” If Beijing ended all commerce—as well as food and energy aid—then Pyongyang would face extraordinary hardship. But even that doesn't guarantee capitulation. During the late 1990s a half million or more North Koreans are believed to have starved to death, as the Kim Jong-il government refused to change course. Kim Jong-un could similarly resist change, irrespective of the cost. If so and the regime survives, then what? How would the United States “solve” the problem?

Another possibility is a messy implosion. North Korea resists and the system collapses. Potential consequences include mass hardship and refugee flows, factional military fighting, loose nukes and Chinese intervention. A reconstituted Pyongyang dominated by Beijing might be the result, a solution of sorts, though certainly not the one traditionally desired by either Seoul or

Washington. Would the United States and South Korea be prepared to live with those consequences?

Finally, China might do something, such as a further tightening of the economic screws to make its point, without seeking to wreck the regime and system. And Pyongyang might continue its present course, with at most a modest slowdown in pace of weapons tests combined with a professed willingness to talk. How, then, would President Trump “do it,” whatever he considers “it” to be?

His administration might impose more unilateral sanctions and secondary penalties on Chinese institutions dealing with the North Korea. This approach likely would elicit resistance from Beijing and spoil the Mar-a-Lago mood, so to speak. It also might not work, since so far the Kim dynasty has survived every economic escalation. Would the president then view military action as option? Even if the South Korean government said no? Even if full-scale war might result?

Before charging down a policy cul-de-sac that will leave Washington with no alternative than retreat or war, the United States should consider whether there are any alternatives which offer sufficient peace and stability without victory. For instance, an interim accord including verifiable North Korean nuclear freeze and conventional military cutback, U.S. troop reductions and the end of South Korea’s annual military exercises. Negotiations would then be backed by China over a “grand bargain” of sorts: nuclear disarmament, American diplomatic recognition, an all-party peace treaty formally ending the war, U.S. withdrawal of conventional forces, a pledge of no-first-use of nuclear weapons, economic inclusion and more.

An alternative would be to pick up on an idea expressed by candidate Trump: the best way to match a continuing North Korean nuclear program might be for Washington to publicly consider stepping back should South Korea and Japan decide to develop their own nuclear deterrents. That possibility might not bother Pyongyang. But it almost certainly would garner a reaction in China. Such an approach just might spur all sides to try harder to find a negotiated settlement.

What does the president really think about solving the North Korean nuclear crisis? Hard to say. But he seems open to a creative answer, perhaps even employing summitry and counterproliferation. In any case, Washington should proceed assuming that Pyongyang’s rulers are rational and pursuing logical ends. Only by addressing North Korea’s interests is there much chance of defusing the crisis.

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