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Talk to North Korea? Tillerson beats Trump

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Secretary of State Rex Tillerson insists that contrary to news reports he did not consider resigning. However, he failed to deny that he called the president a moron. President Donald Trump returned the favor in his own unique way.

Secretary Tillerson recently indicated that “we are probing” North Korea, with which American officials have “lines of communication,” regarding possible negotiations. Indeed, added Tillerson, “We can talk to them, we do talk to them.”

But then the president declared the secretary was “wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man.” That was the same President Trump who once said he would be “honored” to meet the North’s Kim Jong-un. And whose Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, recently insisted that North Korea “is still a diplomatically-led effort.”

It’s unclear what to call foreign policy in the Trump administration. On a range of issues Washington appears to have at least two different foreign policies. In this case Secretary Tillerson has the better argument.

President Trump spent the last couple of months doing the foreign policy equivalent of the Maori Haka in an attempt to intimidate Kim. But the latter has mastered the art of the florid threat and will always trump Trump when it comes to insults.

In belittling his secretary of state’s efforts, the president insisted that “we’ll do what has to be done!” What that is, however, no one knows — probably not even the president himself.

So far his policy looks a lot like that of his predecessor. The major difference today is the U.S. president constantly threatens war.

The more President Trump does so without acting, the more he looks like a loud-mouthed poseur. In which case the North Koreans may not take his threats seriously even when they should.

But even scarier is the thought that he might be serious. U.S. military strikes, even if initially limited in scope, likely would trigger the Second Korean War. The DPRK would have every reason to believe that almost any action was directed at decapitating the North’s leadership or destroying its most powerful weapons as a prelude to regime change, as Washington has done elsewhere. North Korea’s most rational course would be to strike immediately to preempt a feared U.S. attack.

Although the Republic of Korea and U.S. would ultimately win, the cost would be horrendous. Reassuring claims from U.S. hawks that war would be no big deal — for instance, Rep. Duncan

Hunter recently argued that residents of Seoul could head underground or go south — are convenient when uttered by those with the Pacific Ocean in between them and any combat.

South Korea would become a massive battleground. Washington would have triggered the very war that it sought to prevent since the armistice ended fighting in the Korean War in 1953.

Sanctions alone also are unlikely to bring Pyongyang to heel. The Kim regime is feeling the pressure and more could be done. However, the well-being of the North Korean people, especially the millions viewed as untrustworthy and stuck the countryside, is not a priority of Pyongyang.

So just what does the president believe “has to be done”? He is far better at making threats than taking action.

There is widespread agreement that Pyongyang believes nuclear weapons are necessary to ensure regime survival and won't be talked out of them. The North Koreans with whom I met were insistent on that point when I visited the DPRK in June, which matches their government's behavior. In the midst of the Tillerson-Trump brouhaha the State Department acknowledged: “North Korean officials have shown no indication that they are interested in or ready for talks regarding denuclearization.”

But that is no reason not to meet. Talking to North Korea would reduce the political temperature on the peninsula. While no one actually wants war, least of all Kim, whose forces would lose.

Moreover, as Victor Cha, reportedly slated to be the new U.S. ambassador to South Korea, observed in the past, Pyongyang's behavior appears to be less provocative when the regime is engaged diplomatically with America. The North probably sees more potential benefit from more responsible behavior.

Talking also would reduce Pyongyang's incentive to use confrontation to get Washington's attention. More important, talks with “Rocket Man” would open channels to a regime which we little understand but which is becoming more dangerous. Refusing to engage Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union would have made the Cold War even more dangerous.

Finally, negotiators could look for “deals” in both nations' interest. The likelihood of North Korea giving up its nuclear weapons is about nil. Nevertheless, steps short of denuclearization could still advance U.S. security.

For instance, a freeze on testing would slow the North's development of a force capable of threatening the U.S. mainland. Limiting the size of Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal would at least constrain the Kim dynasty's potential for doing harm.

Moreover, making the effort would encourage enhanced Chinese cooperation with Washington. Beijing wants neither a failed state nor a united Korea allied with America hosting U.S. troops on its border. But the Xi government blames American policy for creating the current crisis by threatening and isolating North Korea.

Some of President Trump's instincts have merit. But his newfound enthusiasm for war is counterproductive, even dangerous.

In contrast, Secretary Tillerson is doing just what the secretary of state is supposed to do — look for a peaceful alternative. His efforts might be doomed to failure. But he, and we, can't be sure unless he tries.

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