

RESPONSIBLE STATECRAFT

Wake up: Pushing de-nuking on N. Korea is a dream with a nightmare ending

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In July 1953 the war after World War II, often labeled “the forgotten war,” came to an end. Hundreds of thousands had died. Millions had been displaced. The Korean peninsula had been wrecked. The guns finally fell silent.

Although the fighting ended, hostilities did not. The parties agreed to an armistice, but never inked a peace treaty. Today real peace seems as far away as ever. North Korea has ostentatiously rejected talks with the U.S. and Republic of Korea. At the same time, Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un is speeding up work on both his nuclear and missile programs, with the goal of targeting the American homeland.

Although nothing suggests that he is suicidal, preparing to go out in a blaze of glory atop a radioactive funeral pyre in Pyongyang, adding the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea to the short list of countries able to set American cities aflame would tie U.S. survival to the state of inter-Korean relations. China’s relations with Taiwan look stable in comparison.

America’s Korean commentariat leans hawkish. Few policymakers trust the DPRK to do anything other than commit mischief and contemplate mayhem. Thus, there is a broad assumption that Kim is unlikely to agree to anything — and, more important, fulfill any agreement — that falls short of conquest of the South.

That could be true, of course, but despite Kim’s physical resemblance to his grandfather, they differ greatly in the people they ruled and the way they ruled. Kim’s time in Switzerland evidently did not turn him into a liberal but appeared to whet his interest in economic reform. While exhibiting no interest in abandoning his nation’s nuclear program — after Iraq and Libya, what sane foreign dictator on Washington’s naughty list would? — he has shown a knack for diplomacy and appears to recognize reality.

No doubt, he would like to swallow the ROK. However, nothing suggests that he believes that is possible. Which is one reason he is not interested in striking a deal that leaves him vulnerable to U.S. attack. But that does not mean he is opposed to making any agreement, so long as North Korea remains a nuclear power. His proffer in Hanoi — to close the Yongbyon nuclear facilities in return for substantial sanctions relief — might have been unacceptable, but so are most initial prices in the bazaar. Negotiations could have yielded something, however limited, that was worthwhile. And the U.S. will not know what Kim is prepared to do unless it presses him.

Which Washington should do now. True, the Biden administration has done almost everything but beg to draw the North into negotiations. However, Kim realizes that Washington is offering nothing new. The U.S. insists on a promise to denuclearize, which will not be forthcoming. Only South Africa, in unique circumstances, dismantled a small number of existing nuclear weapons. The likelihood of the DPRK following suit is infinitesimal.

Rather than prevent negotiations from beginning, the U.S. should pursue more limited arms control accords. Washington need not abandon the hope — or perhaps fantasy — of Pyongyang doing a nuclear full monty. Rather, the U.S. should not demand the North's assent, which would not be forthcoming. Successful arms control would be consistent with denuclearization, and if circumstances changed Washington could revive that objective.

Unfortunately, the question remains: how to get Kim to start talking, even about arms control? He would have to believe that the U.S. had changed its position, which might require more than a State Department press release. Moreover, since the failed Hanoi summit his government has strengthened its negotiating position.

Pyongyang launched some 100 missiles last year. It presumably is moving closer to developing not only ICBMs, but also MIRVs, multiple warheads for those intercontinental missiles. The regime's goals have expanded in tandem: “the development of the new-type ICBM Hwasongpho-18 will extensively reform the strategic deterrence components of the DPRK, radically promote the effectiveness of its nuclear counterattack posture and bring about a change in the practicality of its offensive military strategy.”

Kim is unlikely to sacrifice these plans for the Biden administration's mess of policy pottage.

U.S. officials should communicate that they are interested in discussing ideas to reduce tensions. This should include consideration of measures to increase personal and official contacts between the two nations and reduce sanctions on commercial dealings.

Washington could offer to suspend some economic restrictions if serious talks got underway. Any up-front benefits should be reversible, to encourage Pyongyang to keep its promises. The initial objective should be to limit the size and reach of the North's missiles and nukes. With warnings that the Kim regime is on track to accumulate as many as 240 nuclear weapons in the next few years, a verifiable freeze would be worth serious compensation.

Nevertheless, in Washington opposition to engagement is strong. Some hawks see diplomacy as surrender, a foolish position. It is more important to talk with one's adversaries than one's allies. A misunderstanding between Washington and Seoul is not likely to lead to war. If the U.S. and DPRK continue on their present path, the potential for serious conflict will only grow.

Critics of negotiation insist that the North would cheat on any agreement it might make. If so, then why bother promoting denuclearization? Pyongyang is most likely to cheat on a pact that would leave its security entirely in America's hands. Enforcement is required for any arrangement. If that is impossible, the U.S. should give up on denuclearization.

Others warn of undermining international nonproliferation efforts, fueling South Korean support for building nuclear weapons, and harming U.S. relations with Seoul and Tokyo. However, the problem is North Korea's status as a nuclear power, with an arsenal that could soon place it firmly among the second-rank nuclear powers. Recognition of this reality would change nothing. Nonproliferation has failed and neither the ROK nor Japan has a better response.

The Biden administration's approach has been to embrace the South ever more firmly, which means promising that Washington really would sacrifice U.S. cities to save Seoul. Indeed, the recent summit seemed to discuss little else, with Washington concocting all sorts of committees and meetings to convince the Yoon government that it now has an important role in determining when the US might use nukes, which it doesn't.

This is manifestly bad policy for America and South Korea. The former is risking nuclear attack on the homeland. The second is betting that a U.S. president would sacrifice millions of American lives to retaliate against the North for an attack on the South. Far better for both to pursue a policy designed to reduce the likelihood of such a contingency, starting with limiting Pyongyang's nuclear arsenal.

Seven decades have passed since the guns in Korea fell silent. President Donald Trump briefly broke through the hostile status quo on the Korean peninsula. Unfortunately, that effort failed, and now the North is threatening to greatly expand its nuclear reach. Unless the Biden administration tries something different, the future is only going to become more dangerous.

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