



Why do Americans worry about North Korea?

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Despite the COVID-19 crisis, Washington policymakers fixated on the status of Kim Jong-un, the 36-year-old leader of an isolated, impoverished state half a world away. Then came reports of North Korean construction of ICBMs and a new missile support facility.

The Pentagon previously cited Pyongyang as a reason the U.S. required a credible nuclear deterrent. President Donald Trump even threatened "fire and fury" against the Kim government, before switching course and organizing a summit with the communist monarch. At that time six of every ten Americans believed the North to be the nation posing the greatest threat to America.

Why do Americans pay attention to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK)?

After the surrender of Imperial Japan the U.S. and Soviet Union divided the Korean peninsula, before that a Japanese colony, into occupation zones. In 1950 the North invaded. In the midst of the deepening Cold War, the Republic of Korea's (ROK) survival mattered to the U.S. Japan was vulnerable and uneasy, disarmed and occupied by America. To Western Europe, facing the victorious Red Army, U.S. credibility seemed on the line. Washington intervened to save the ROK and then remained with troops on the ground.

However, the correlation of forces has since changed dramatically. The Cold War is over. The South has more than 50 times the GDP and twice the population of North Korea. Neither Russia nor China would back Pyongyang in renewed aggression. There is no need for a continuing American military presence on the peninsula.

And if the U.S. was not there, North Korea would pay no attention to the U.S.

The point is fundamental. The DPRK does not threaten America. Pyongyang is not arming to attack the U.S. The Kim regime is not going to start launching nuclear-tipped missiles at Los Angeles, Honolulu, Chicago, New York, Washington, and other cities.

North Korea's activities vis-à-vis America are defensive.

Of course, the Kim dynasty is evil and Pyongyang's peaceful protestations cannot be trusted. But nothing suggests that Kim Jong-un and those around him are suicidal. And to start a war with America would be suicidal. To the contrary, there is plenty of evidence that Kim, like his father and grandfather who ruled before him, prefers his virgins in this world rather than the next one.

Even during worst of the Cold War, the regime's blood-curdling rhetoric was carefully targeted at U.S. "imperialists," South Korean "puppets," and Japan, the peninsula's former colonial ruler.

Pyongyang does not routinely threaten to incinerate China, Russia, Europe, India and most everyone else.

Before President Trump's diplomatic rapprochement, Kim had good reason to fear America. In recent years Washington has regularly threatened, sanctioned, bombed, and invaded a gaggle of essentially helpless Third World states, including Afghanistan, Grenada, Haiti, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Panama, Serbia, Somalia and Syria.

Although the North's conventional forces could wreak havoc in, though probably not defeat, the ROK, it was not clear that the Trump administration would be deterred by harm to the South. Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.), a Trump confidante, said that at least a war in South Korea would be "over there," not "over here." In his mind, apparently, catastrophe in the ROK would be a reasonable price to pay for disarming Pyongyang and ousting Kim. Thus, it wasn't enough for Pyongyang to possess nukes. It needed a means of delivering them to the American heartland.

So far denuclearization has failed because Pyongyang has no reason to trust America. The ouster of Libya's Moammar Gadhafi established a disastrous precedent. Gadhafi foolishly agreed to end his missile and nuclear programs in exchange for promises of the diplomatic equivalent of love and kisses. Yet the moment he was vulnerable as a result of a popular revolt, his new-found foreign "friends" started bombing him. Perhaps the U.S. and Europe did not disarm him with this result in mind, but they showed no hesitation in taking him out when the opportunity emerged. No doubt, Kim does not want to suffer a repeat.

Since he is unlikely to yield his nukes, even if negotiations with Trump restart, there is only one other way to eliminate the possibility of conflict with the North. It is to stop threatening the DPRK with war. Then Kim could safely ignore America, as he does most other nations.

How to do that? Turn over South Korea's defense to the South Koreans. End the unnecessary U.S. commitment to Seoul. Initiate a phased withdrawal of American troops. Turn the "mutual" defense treaty into a looser pact for cooperation to advance shared interests. And no more "fire and fury" rhetoric, even if the North and South return to past hostilities.

Such an approach would be prudential and pragmatic, not appeasement. The Pentagon's responsibility is to defend America, not provide welfare to populous and prosperous countries, however friendly they may be. The U.S. presence is unnecessary, since the South is able to protect itself. Nothing in the peninsula is worth the possibility of nuclear war: on the verge of defeat, Pyongyang would have nothing to lose by threatening to loose its nukes if Washington did not halt.

Moreover, Uncle Sam is essentially bankrupt and must make cutbacks in nonessential spending. With the collapse in federal revenues and massive increase in spending due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the federal deficit likely will exceed \$4 trillion this year and \$2 trillion next year. America's domestic needs should take precedence. A good place to start cutting is the defense dole for the South and others.

Although diplomacy with Pyongyang has stalemated, Trump's initiative defused bilateral tensions. Only 13 percent of Americans now believe that the North poses the greatest threat to America. A majority opposed military strikes on the DPRK's nuclear facilities.

Washington should return "defense" to its original meaning, defense of America rather than the rest of the world. Military guarantees to South Korea are dangerous, putting Americans at nuclear risk. It is well past time to focus on America's security.

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