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Cory Gardner sees his North Korea “playbook” showing up in Donald Trump’s decisions

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WASHINGTON — Long before President Donald Trump dubbed him the “Rocket Man,” North Korean leader Kim Jong Un was known by a different nickname in the office of U.S. Sen. Cory Gardner: the “Forgotten Maniac.”

That’s the moniker Gardner coined for Kim in the first year that he chaired the Senate subcommittee that oversees East Asia policy, and the dig was intended as a swipe at both Kim and an Obama administration that Gardner saw as too lax on North Korea’s ambitions.

“Chaos in the Middle East has diverted Western eyes, but Kim Jong Un’s reign of terror in North Korea continues,” the Colorado Republican wrote in a December 2015 essay in The Wall Street Journal. “It is time for the U.S. to counter this forgotten maniac.”

Twenty-two months later, Kim is far from forgotten — though Obama officials would dispute he had ever been overlooked — while Gardner has become a leading voice in Congress on what to do about North Korea and its growing nuclear arsenal.

“Today, I no longer call him the Forgotten Maniac,” Gardner said in an interview.

Through both legislation and diplomacy, Gardner has advocated a strategy that would isolate North Korea as much as possible.

It’s an approach that is widely — though not universally — supported and one that received a big boost last week when Trump ordered new sanctions on North Korea’s trading partners.

“The actions announced by the administration ... are what I have been calling for, and are a huge step forward in the United States’ efforts to stop a nuclear war from breaking out on the Korean Peninsula,” said Gardner in a statement.

His press office said it came straight from the “North Korea Playbook” of the first-term senator.

The degree to which Gardner is actually affecting U.S. policy is up for debate, though there’s little doubt he has assumed a bigger role since the White House changed hands.

In the short term, that means Trump has an ally who can help him pressure North Korea from Capitol Hill — even if Gardner hasn’t always agreed with Trump’s rhetoric.

Longer term, it keeps alive the political ambitions of the 43-year-old lawmaker.

“He’s had an unusual opportunity, but I think he’s played it well,” said Doug Bandow of the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank.

Gardner clamors for new sanctions

Few of Gardner's ideas on North Korea are original; policymakers long have discussed additional sanctions or a diplomatic push that would force China to take a more active role with its neighbor. And it's hard to imagine the U.S. not taking a tougher approach in light of several recent weapons tests by Pyongyang.

But Gardner has staked out a space for himself since introducing a bill in fall 2015 that called for new penalties on people or companies that aided North Korea and its pursuit of weapons.

Initially, the measure didn't gain much traction. But after North Korea claimed in January 2016 that it had detonated a hydrogen bomb, Congress and President Barack Obama moved swiftly to turn the idea into law.

Now, with a Republican in the White House, Gardner said he talks frequently with U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley — often after something bad happens, aides said — and stays in contact with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson.

Gardner's primary role, said Trump administration officials and Republican allies, is to serve as point man in the Senate on legislation and ideas related to North Korea.

"Senator Gardner has become a great partner and supportive friend as we take on the challenges facing the world, like North Korea," Haley said in a statement. "He's very smart, very engaged and very tough-minded."

Last week, Gardner sent letters to the ambassadors of China and 20 other countries asking that they sever diplomatic ties with North Korea.

Earlier this year, Gardner was criticized for meeting with the president of the Philippines because of Rodrigo Duterte's brutal crackdown on his country's drug users and traffickers. But Gardner said he used the time to press Duterte to suspend trade relations with North Korea, which he later did.

Legislatively, Gardner has targeted 10 individual Chinese companies with sanctions for doing business with North Korea. Gardner said the mere threat of official action has prompted commitments from some of the companies to stop trading, though his office did not identify which ones.

"The United States needs to get China to put pressure on North Korea," said Victor Cha, a former Bush administration official reportedly in line to become Trump's ambassador to South Korea.

"If they are not willing to do that, for whatever reason, then the only choice the United States is left with is to pressure China directly and to single out those individuals (and) those companies that we suspect" are doing business with them, he added.

Cha argued that sanctions are the device that will force North Korea back to the negotiating table — though not everyone agrees.

Ken Gause, of the think tank CNA, said efforts to further isolate North Korea only gives Kim more of a motivation to develop the means to strike the U.S. mainland with a nuclear weapon.

After North Korea watched the U.S. lead efforts to depose foreign leaders in Iraq and Libya, its military became convinced that a nuclear arsenal was the best way to prevent a similar fate, Gause said.

For that reason, he said current U.S. policy leads to only two outcomes: a military fight or a change in strategy built on accepting and containing a nuclear North Korea.

“Our definition of diplomacy is basically dictating the terms of surrender of North Korea’s nuclear program, which isn’t really diplomacy,” Gause said.

Instead, he suggested an approach that would provide economic incentives in exchange for North Korea freezing its nuclear program and halting tests.

“The idea that we can completely strangle North Korea is a fallacy,” Gause said.

Across the aisle, Gardner’s approach gains traction

But congressional Democrats and Republicans both have advocated for tougher measures.

Over the summer, Gardner put forward legislation with Sen. Ed Markey of Massachusetts, his Democratic counterpart on the East Asia subcommittee, that would exclude from the U.S. financial system any company that did business with North Korea, including those 10 Chinese companies.

Trump seems to agree with that approach. Last week, he ordered a new round of sanctions that echoed much of what Gardner and Markey outlined in their bill.

“I can see that, increasingly, the Trump administration is adopting the view that we included in our legislation,” Markey said.

He described Gardner as “energetic” and “extremely easy to work with” and said the two were “looking to introduce even stronger legislation in October” aimed at North Korea.

“I find him to be focused on developing serious ideas and solutions,” Markey said.

While Gardner and Trump often are in agreement, there is some daylight between the two politicians on how best to talk to North Korea.

After Trump referred to Kim as “Rocket Man” and threatened to “totally destroy North Korea” in a speech at the United Nations, Gardner said he would have handled it differently.

“I think it sent a strong message, (but) I would have used different words,” Gardner said.

Gardner said his trips to Seoul have convinced him that the U.S. must expend every effort to develop a peaceful solution, as a war would devastate the South Korean capital.

“That’s why we have to avoid military conflict,” Gardner said. “And that’s why we have to make this ‘maximum pressure’ doctrine work.”

As has often been the case, North Korea responded to Trump’s latest provocation with its own insult; Kim on Friday said of Trump: “I will surely and definitely tame the mentally deranged U.S. dotard with fire.”

In a sign, perhaps, of his own relevance to the debate, Gardner also has been the target of verbal attacks from the Kim regime. In May, he was called a “psychopath” who is “mixed in with human dirt.”

Said Gardner in response of his own new nickname: “I’m going to continue to call on the president to fully enforce my legislation that will economically cripple the North Korean regime, and if that gets this madman to send nonsensical insults at me, so be it.”