



There's No Choice but Negotiation With North Korea

Moon Jae-in's White House visit is a good chance to step up talks again.

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South Korean President Moon Jae-in is set to meet U.S. President Joe Biden later this week, and even before the critical meet, Moon hasn't waited to give advice on dealing with North Korea. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Moon called on Biden to engage Pyongyang since denuclearization is a “matter of survival.”

But the task of stripping Pyongyang of its nukes is becoming more difficult. As NBC reported, “after decades of sanctions, threats and diplomacy, including Trump’s showy summits, North Korea has more nukes than ever and missiles that can hit the U.S.” Indeed, North Korea could have 200 nuclear weapons before the end of the decade, according to the Rand Corporation and the Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

That leaves the United States back at the negotiating table. Biden has signaled his interest in engaging with North Korea and reacted calmly to Pyongyang’s short-range missile tests. *Washington Post* columnist David Ignatius quoted the usual unnamed “senior administration official” saying “The likelihood of North Korea giving up nuclear weapons is close to zero.” The latter suggested the administration accepted that denuclearization is beyond reach and would seek to make mini-deals on issues like proliferation and new weapons systems.

This is a sensible strategy—perhaps the only possible one. And it should not be delayed. Although North Korea does not have the resources to develop and produce all the weapons on leader Kim Jong Un’s well-publicized wish list, Pyongyang has demonstrated a surprising ability to surmount poverty and sanctions to become a nuclear power capable of targeting the continental United States.

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International sanctions also only go so far, especially given Beijing’s indifference to actually enforcing them. North Korea has survived more than a year of essentially self-sanctions due to its pandemic-induced isolation. Although Kim has warned of another “arduous march,” North Korea apparently has begun to reopen again, at least for consumer goods. NK News reported foreign food items and soft drinks are returning to stores.

Of course, it is possible the skeptics are right: Kim is not prepared to make any deal. Yet, although Kim’s no liberal, he does seem genuinely committed to economic growth. How else

would he move beyond a modern version of militarized Prussia, which was once described as an army with a country rather than a country with an army? China has also been frustrated for decades with North Korea's failure to follow its lead and open up enough to boost growth; Kim's limited economic openings will be met with approval in Beijing. That points to another factor: He has proved to be more interested in and much better at diplomacy than his predecessors, from his handling of Chinese President Xi Jinping to his half-contest, half-wooing of former U.S. President Donald Trump. He's not a carbon copy of his father or grandfather; although everything he does and says should be treated with appropriately great skepticism.

Most of all, there is no better alternative to negotiation. A few critics have suggested greater "maximum pressure" could bring North Korea to heel, but its weathering of COVID-19 isolation has proved otherwise. Moreover, the Trump administration's efforts to force Iran's, Syria's, and Venezuela's governments to surrender by similarly starving their people failed. This policy also ignores the moral brutality of targeting victims to achieve preferred political ends—and Beijing's likely willingness to provide food and oil in sufficient quantities to keep North Korea independent.

Another argument is threatening war and applying military pressure—in addition to sanctions paired with promises of good things from the United States after denuclearization—might persuade Kim to come clean. But only if he forgets Washington's long line of self-serving lies and broken promises to other vulnerable regimes, from Libya's surrender of missile and nuclear programs followed by the toppling and death of its leader to Washington's withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran. Once North Korea gives up its nukes, one can imagine Uncle Sam playing Darth Vader in *Star Wars*: "I am altering the deal. Pray that I don't alter it any further."

Violence, of course, is always an option. It's just a brutally foolish one in this case. It begs belief that North Korea, generally paranoid and specifically fearful of attempts at leadership decapitation, would blithely allow the United States to destroy its prime military assets without responding. However, full-scale war would be catastrophic in the best of circumstances and could kill millions of people depending on Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities.

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Admittedly, there are U.S. policymakers who seem to care little about the death of Koreans. For instance, South Carolina's Sen. Lindsey Graham observed approvingly: "If thousands die, they're going to die over there. They're not going to die here." Such attitudes would likely convince any South Korean government, no matter how conservative, to forbid U.S. use of forces located in South Korea for any attack. Indeed, this would not be a new policy. Former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun described South Korea as a "balancer" and insisted his permission was necessary for U.S. use of South Korean bases for regional military operations.

That leaves diplomacy as the only option, no matter how unsatisfactory it might seem to be.

The Biden administration is very busy, but North Korea is an issue that won't wait. Biden should have a proposed strategy ready to discuss with Moon before he arrives. There is no time to waste—and talking is the only way out.

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