



## **When Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un Talk**

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Over the last couple of months, North Korea seemed to be the last thing on everyone's mind. As the little Hermit Kingdom toiled away on its nuclear arsenal, many in the West have remained focused on what President-elect Donald Trump and the resurgent Republican Congress could mean for trade, taxes, and health care.

Yet according to the latest reports, President Barack Obama warned Trump that a nuclear North Korea may be the greatest foreign policy concern of the next four years. For all the focus on domestic issues, the Trump administration may find its first challenge in the dangerous game being played by Kim Jong Un.

As many have pointed out, a Trump administration could lead to major changes in U.S. foreign policy. While some of Trump's proposed policy changes may disrupt the international status quo, an area of welcome policy change may involve how the U.S. and its allies handle North Korea. Despite an on-again, off-again policy of military exercises, foreign aid, and sanctions, the oppressive Workers' Party of Korea and Kim family continue to rule North Korea, and the country's nuclear capacity keeps growing every year. In the interest of securing our East Asian allies and improving the lives of average North Koreans, it's time for three big changes in our foreign policy.

First, the Trump administration should explore withdrawing conventional U.S. military forces from the Korean Peninsula, a move he called for multiple times along the campaign trail. As foreign policy scholar Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute has argued, the 28,500 U.S. troops on the peninsula likely do more harm than good. There is wide agreement that the advanced South Korean military is more than capable of defeating the poorly equipped North Korean military and the Kim regime knows this.

Beyond wasting U.S. taxpayer money, the deployment may actually prevent an end to the 66-year long conflict. North Korean officials regularly refer to the presence of U.S. conventional forces on the peninsula to justify the escalation of the nation's nuclear program. By removing conventional forces from the Korean Peninsula, a Trump administration could help move us closer toward a normalization of relations and a formal end to the half century-long conflict.

Second, while working to diffuse the immediate military threat of a nuclear North Korea, Trump's administration should refocus the conversation on reform within North Korea. One low-cost way to inspire reform could be to expand access to the outside world among North Korean citizens. Educational and cultural exchanges, similar to those that occurred among the U.S. and the Soviet Union in 1958, could expose North Korean elites to the freedom and affluence of the outside world.

Another option is to expand radio broadcasts into the country. With an estimated 8 to 15 percent of North Koreans listening to international radio, Radio Free Asia could play the powerful role played by Radio Free Europe during the Cold War in subverting totalitarianism. Beyond radio, smuggling USB drives loaded with soap operas, books, and movies into North Korea could reduce dependence on official regime propaganda.

In the end, the more information North Koreans have about the outside world, the more they will press for reforms in whatever ways available to them. According to North Korea expert Andrei Lankov, such programs played a substantial role in exposing Eastern Europeans to the backwardness of their living conditions and drove Soviet elites like Mikhail Gorbachev to institute sweeping reforms.

Finally, the Trump administration should critically reassess the utility of sanctions. Importantly, no sanctions on North Korea will ever work without buy-in from China. China is North Korea's biggest trading partner, providing the North Korean regime with food, arms, and energy since the installation of Kim Il Sung in 1948.

Getting China to stop cooperating with the regime is no small task: Beijing benefits from having a friendly nation buffering its border against a U.S.-friendly South Korea. Worse still, according to national security expert Robert Maginnis, the main effect of current sanctions is to keep average North Koreans poor, hungry, and dependent on the current regime. By reforming current sanctions and focusing on restricting military goods and sensitive resources, the administration could alleviate the suffering of millions and facilitate communication between North Korean citizens and the outside world.

It's hard to say with any certainty how the new Trump administration will change America's foreign policy, as Trump's comments on the subject have been vague and often contradictory. But one thing is certain: the status quo with North Korea cannot last. By normalizing relations, connecting to average North Koreans, and rethinking our sanctions policy, the new administration could shake up policy for the better. The outgoing Obama administration views this as the new administration's greatest challenge, and with good reason. Without a change in how we approach the issue, the suffering of average North Koreans will worsen, the regime will grow stronger, and the security of our allies in the region will deteriorate.

