

## U.S. once again learns that intervention isn't cost-free

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Since the lapse of the much derided “Vietnam syndrome,” Americans have come to simultaneously expect cost-free intervention and absolute homeland security.

It's a charming vision. And in the early years after the Cold War it appeared to be a reality. For instance, Washington and its NATO allies bombed Serbia for 79 days in 1989 without incurring a single casualty.

But then came Sept. 11, 2001. Terrorists angered not by America's freedoms but by Washington's actions struck back in horrendous fashion.

Which unleashed new rounds of larger and more violent U.S. bombings, invasions, and occupations. Which in turn resulted in more terrorist attacks.

Still, the human cost remained relatively low. Hundreds of thousands of Iraqis died in the aftermath of Washington's invasion. Even the worst terrorist assaults against the West killed in scores, rarely much topping a hundred. They were awful, but were not enough to stop myopic U.S. officials from launching one war after another, convinced that just one more intervention would make Americans secure again.

But now North Korea is building both nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

The unruly North Korea has barged into the genteel nuclear club, feverishly working to develop ICBMs capable of targeting American cities. The result in Washington is shock, even panic. An obviously befuddled President Donald Trump asked: “Does this guy have anything better to do with his life?”

Well, no, at least if Kim is looking after his nation's, and especially his regime's, security.

Look at a map. Which country has inked a security treaty with the other nation's neighbor and adversary? Which country has established multiple military bases nearby?

Which country has routinely sailed aircraft carriers up the other nation's coast and flown bombers over the other nation? Which country already possesses nuclear-tipped missiles capable of eradicating the other?

Moreover, which country has routinely imposed regime change on governments it disliked for one reason or another? Which country even took out the dictator with whom it had negotiated the elimination of his missile and nuclear programs?

Which country has routinely threatened the other with military action, indicating that everything is “on the table”?

Hint: not North Korea.

Of course, the Kim dynasty is evil, has oppressed its people, and is fully capable of starting a new war. However, there is no evidence that the current Kim is or either of his predecessors was suicidal: all demonstrated a preference for virgins in this rather than the next life.

Which means they wanted to target the U.S. primarily to create a deterrent to prevent Washington from attacking them.

Nuclear weapons have a number of uses for the North. ICBMs, in contrast, have far more limited utility. Indeed, their only present use is to deter America.

North Korea's most obviously potential enemies are South Korea, the victim of Kim Il Sung's attempted reunification campaign in 1950, and Japan, hated colonial master and potential belligerent in a future conflict. Pyongyang has shown no military interest in more distant locations.

Except America.

The North would not gratuitously build weapons capable of hitting the U.S. absent a threat from Washington to attack the North. Pyongyang's objective is to keep America out. The best way to do that normally would be to leave the U.S. alone.

Except that America's leaders don't want to leave North Korea alone. In which case the best way to deter U.S. involvement is to possess a small but real nuclear deterrent, profoundly changing Washington's calculus to intervene.

Would Washington even consider massive conventional involvement similar to 1950 in a new Korean War? Would American officials still hold the traditional "nuclear umbrella" over South Korea, risking Los Angeles and Portland to protect Seoul?

Suddenly intervention doesn't look like such a great deal for America.

Better to end unnecessary interventions. With 40 times the GDP, twice the population, a vast technological and industrial edge, and far greater international support, South Korea long has been able to defend itself conventionally. Washington should turn defense responsibilities over to Seoul and bring its troops home.

As for nuclear deterrence, the U.S. should consider encouraging Seoul and possibly Tokyo to join the nuclear parade and build nuclear deterrents. No president should risk the U.S. homeland to protect nations that are not vital to America's defense and which could protect themselves.

North Korea is teaching Washington an expensive lesson. Promiscuous intervention could result in nuclear destruction.

Trump should bring U.S. ambitions into line with foreign realities. America's safety depends on it.

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