

Three policies to solve North Korea problem

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Nuclear weapons have become the great international equalizer. During the Cold War the U.S. and Soviet Union couldn't afford to risk a conventional war.

Now North Korea is knocking on the nuclear club door.

Pyongyang is a good example of the aphorism that even paranoids have enemies. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea has fallen dramatically behind the South. Add in Seoul's ally, the U.S., and the DPRK has no chance in any conventional conflict.

In recent years Washington ousted the leaders of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya and dismantled Serbia. President Donald Trump talked about sending an "armada" off of the North's coast and drenching North Korea in "fire and fury."

Acquiring both nukes and ICBMs is a game-changer, but not because Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un plans a surprise attack on America. He is evil, not suicidal. Rather, he wants to deter U.S. military involvement and attack.

Since he's in the U.S. military's gunsights, he needs the ability to strike back. With that, Washington would have to rethink whether it is willing to intervene even in another conventional conflict.

Current attempts to eliminate the North's nuclear program seem doomed to failure. The North has repeatedly said it won't voluntarily yield its nuclear program. When I visited Pyongyang in June, officials blamed Washington's "hostile policy" and promised to match America nuke for nuke.

Ever tighter sanctions would hurt the DPRK, but the regime survived at least a half million starvation deaths in the late 1990s. And without full Chinese support, unlikely so long as Washington simply demands that Beijing hand over its sole East Asian ally, the impact of unilateral penalties will be limited.

Military action would risk triggering the Second Korean War. While the U.S. (and Republic of Korea) forces would prevail in any war, the cost could be horrific, especially to South Koreans, whose land would be the primary battlefield, at least initially.

So Washington needs to take a different direction.

Drop the "Mutual" Defense Treaty and withdraw U.S. forces from South Korea. The alliance is outmoded. The ROK could construct whatever armed forces are necessary to deter the North and defeat it in any war.

The prospect of a war going nuclear raises the question whether the U.S. is really willing to risk a nuclear attack on its homeland to continue protecting a nation able to take over responsibility for its own defense. In a crisis, U.S. officials are more likely to abandon their commitments than bring the war home to America.

Encourage South Korea to replace America's "nuclear umbrella" with its own nuclear deterrent. Nonproliferation is a worthy objective, but in Northeast Asia the policy has acted a bit like domestic gun control: only the bad guys have guns. In this case, the nuclear powers are Russia, China, and North Korea.

Does America forever want to risk Los Angeles and Seattle—and maybe Chicago and New York City as well—to protect Seoul, Tokyo, Canberra, and other cities in the region? Would an American president really follow through on the promises of previous leaders and risk mass destruction of the American homeland in defense of another nation, especially one not essential to America's defense?

Propose a neutral reunited Korea in return for greatly increased Chinese pressure on the North. Contrary to the seeming assumption of most U.S. policymakers, Beijing is not irrational in tolerating the DPRK's confrontational behavior.

The People's Republic of China doesn't want a failed state, perhaps enveloped in factional conflict, on its border, with potentially millions of refugees flooding north. Finally, the PRC does not desire a reunited Korea allied with America hosting U.S. troops, strengthening the system of containment being constructed by Washington.

So the Trump administration should sit down with the Chinese leadership and propose an old-fashioned geopolitical deal. Beijing backs up a comprehensive denuclearization program with tough sanctions. American troops come home from a reunified Korea. Washington ends the threat of involvement in a horrid conventional war and even more dangerous risk of nuclear attack.

North Korea has ended the era in which Americans imagined they could engage in immaculate intervention, striking militarily at will and without consequence. And in which U.S. allies could count on Washington's commitment.

Only if the Trump administration rethinks conventional wisdom is there a chance of getting out of the policy cul-de-sac in which America and its allies currently find themselves.

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