



President Trump to North Korea: Surrender first, talk later

Doug Bandow

December 21, 2017

For Washington, South Korea, and Japan, the most satisfactory solution to the North Korea problem would be Kim Jong-un's surrender. Complete and abject.

Maybe that will happen. We can dream. But it wouldn't be wise to count on that outcome. Yet that appears to be the Trump administration's approach to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

Kim says a nuclear deterrent is necessary for his nation's defense. The president insists that he will loose the dogs of war before the North develops the capability to hit the U.S. So, if the administration is serious, war seems inevitable.

Alas, this would be no "cakewalk," a la Iraq. Unfortunately, retaliation is highly likely. Estimates of potential casualties routinely break a million, and could go far higher if the North dropped nukes on Seoul and Tokyo.

If not war, then negotiation is necessary. Yet the world recently watched the unseemly gelding of Secretary of State (for a little while longer, at least) Rex Tillerson over precisely this issue. He suggested initial talks about talks, or other stuff, without preconditions, with the DPRK.

But after being publicly reprimanded by the president, the secretary abased himself and announced that the North had to "earn" its way back to the negotiating table by ending missile and nuclear tests (receiving nothing in return) and agreeing to give up its nukes and missiles (with only the exact terms of surrender to be determined).

The bizarre spectacle made serious negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea less likely.

The North first must wonder with whom it could talk. Secretary Tillerson obviously doesn't speak for the president and isn't likely to be around much longer.

Second, President Donald Trump demonstrated that he is interested only in the North's virtual surrender. He previously labeled talks a "waste of time" and abandoned his earlier proposals to engage Kim.

More generally, Washington cannot be trusted. The Obama administration took advantage of the Moammar Gadhafi government's elimination of its nuclear and missile programs to impose regime change in Libya, resulting in the regime's destruction and Gadhafi's gruesome death.

President Trump certainly would have to do more than whisper a few sweet nothings into Kim's ear. But the North Korean leader isn't likely to get much more if he begins any negotiation by accepting America's position, as Washington insists.

In short, diplomacy appears to be a dead end. Which brings us back to a war which would be mad to contemplate.

No one outside of Kim, anyway, wants the DPRK to have a nuclear arsenal. But there is no evidence he is suicidal. And the prospect of the much larger People's Republic of China, led by the even more radical Mao Zedong, possessing nuclear weapons was more fearsome.

Likewise, the Soviet Union under America's chief Cold War bete noire, Joseph Stalin, was far scarier than the North. Despite proposals for preventive war, Washington responded by containing and deterring the new nuclear powers.

This should be the starting point in confronting Pyongyang. The DPRK should know that to start a war means defeat. Which is precisely why the North did not renew its takeover attempt over the last 64-plus years.

Next, the U.S. should talk to Pyongyang. Negotiation is communication, not concession.

The lack of relations with China in 1950 contributed to Beijing's fear of America's plans in Korea and prevented the PRC from effectively warning Washington against sending American troops to the Yalu.

In the short-term the U.S. should concentrate on slowing the North's rush to develop its missile and nuclear capabilities. For instance, trading a freeze on new tests for suspension of U.S.-South Korean military exercises, as proposed by China and Russia, would buy time during which the potential combatants could step back, take a breath, and look for peaceful solutions.

In the longer-term Washington should engage the PRC over what the latter needs to toughen

sanctions. The U.S. and its allies should develop a package of benefits, backed by China, in return for North Korean denuclearization. Finally, Washington and the North's neighbors should confront a future in which the DPRK might possess a serious nuclear arsenal.

Today the Trump administration essentially hopes something magical will happen to denuclearize the peninsula. If not, threatens the president, he will plunge the Korean Peninsula, Northeast Asia, and America into war. Instead, the administration must find a peaceful path out of the current impasse.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan, he is the author of several books, including "Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World" and co-author of "The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea."