



## Joe Biden Can Build On Donald Trump's North Korea Strategy

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President Donald Trump's looming departure from the White House—barely a month away—has generated much relief within Washington's foreign policy community, especially regarding Korea. The president's willingness to talk to the North's Kim Jong-un violated the long-standing consensus that Pyongyang should be isolated until its leaders agreed to surrender their nuclear program.

That always seemed unlikely, even a quarter-century ago when North Korea's nuclear development was in its very early stages. The end of the Cold War and the reconciliation of Moscow and Beijing with South Korea left the Democratic People's Republic of Korea even more isolated and vulnerable to the dominant and hubristic United States.

Today, after decades of arrogant meddling, promiscuous intervention, and insistent regime change, no country on Santa's or Uncle Sam's naughty list dare risk going without nuclear weapons. Muammar Gaddafi's fate made clear the value, or lack thereof, of any promise made by Washington. Better to have a few nukes available for an emergency. Pyongyang's capabilities remain a matter of conjecture, but certainly have expanded greatly in recent years. The Kim regime is believed to be close to reaching the U.S. with a nuclear payload.

Yet in the midst of what is obviously bad tidings, National Security Adviser Robert C. O'Brien offered a bit of good news: there is no evidence that the DPRK has been proliferating to other governments or organizations. He observed: "I think the North Koreans understand that if they started proliferating on a significant scale—either ballistic missiles or delivery systems or in the worst-case scenario weapons of mass destruction especially on the nuclear side or biological or chemical as well—that would be crossing a red line with not just the United States but the international community." Indeed, the latter—if meaning China and Russia—might be even more important to Pyongyang than America.

This forbearance comes amid evidence of significant ongoing military developments by Kim Jong-un's government. Pyongyang has not suddenly gone soft. Its October military parade showcased new small arms, tanks, anti-aircraft and tank missiles, short-range missiles, a submarine-launched ballistic missile, and a large intercontinental ballistic missile, almost certainly capable of hitting the U.S. It was quite a spectacle for a regime under extraordinary economic strain due to sanctions reinforced by self-isolation in response to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Formalizing the North's decision not to proliferate would offer a good starting point for agreement between the incoming Biden administration and Kim. Negotiate a formal pact forbidding missile/nuclear testing and WMD proliferation. In return agree to end joint military exercises and other threatening U.S. maneuvers, such as bomber overflights and sending the "armada," as Trump called it, off the North's coast. Perhaps even toss in the symbolic withdrawal of one or another military unit.

Of course, such a bargain would disturb the "usual suspects" in the Korean policy community. Even after Pyongyang was maintaining its testing moratorium the Trump administration was attacked for halting military exercises for "nothing." Yet Washington was enjoying the far better side of the deal. U.S. policymakers desperately wanted to prevent the DPRK from developing an effective deterrent to American intervention, namely possession of a nuclear arsenal capable of devastating U.S. cities. The moratorium stopped North Korea short of that goal.

The allied halt of military exercises is far less consequential. Such maneuvers improved cooperation between allied militaries but did not change the strategic balance of power. Indeed, it is long overdue for South Korea to take over responsibility for its own conventional defense. Continuing to infantilize Seoul is not in America's interest, no matter how much the South desires to maintain its unseemly defense dependence. The criticism of Trump's dealings with North reflects an assumption that the U.S. is entitled to get everything it wants—in this case, the equivalent of Kim's surrender—for nothing in return.

Dealing with North Korea will never be easy. The dynasty's record is one of war and malevolence, beginning with the Korean War. Nevertheless, this Kim is different from his forbears. Dad and grandad emphasized the military, disdained economic reform, and rejected international openness. Kim Jong-un, though no squishy liberal, promised his people economic opportunity, initiated diplomatic contact, and offered to shut down nuclear facilities. That militates against returning to the Obama policy of see no evil, hear no evil, assume no evil, or simply do nothing.

Dealing with the North also offers a subject on which the U.S. and China could cooperate. Contrary to claims, especially from hawkish Republicans who constitute an informal war lobby, Pyongyang is not in Beijing's pocket. The DPRK always has ruthlessly defended its independence, even from nominal allies. As a result, the People's Republic of China sees the

North as a troublesome partner. The PRC would strongly prefer not to have a new nuclear neighbor.

Prior to spring 2018, in advance of the Trump-Kim summit, the Xi Jinping government had minimized contact with Pyongyang, agreed to steadily tougher sanctions, and enforced the new rules. Only the prospect of being cut out of Northeastern Asian affairs prompted a series of Kim-Xi tete-a-tetes. With U.S.-China relations on the rocks, Chinese cooperation with the U.S. on North Korea has cratered as well. The administration recently admonished Beijing for relaxing enforcement of sanctions, to no evident effect.

However, that could change. Washington and Beijing both would benefit from better relations. The incoming Biden administration almost certainly would like to find areas of cooperation without appearing to be a pushover to the increasingly oppressive and aggressive residents of Zhongnanhai. At the same time, the PRC is unlikely to willingly assist the U.S. if the latter insists on its usual approach, with Beijing expected to follow Washington's dictates to achieve Washington's ends, even if contrary to Chinese interests. Thus, simply demanding tougher PRC sanctions enforcement, the Trump administration's latest gambit, is unlikely to go far.

The two governments should discuss their mutual red lines. The PRC does not want a nuclear North Korea, which likely will make an already truculent neighbor more difficult as its arsenal expands. But neither does it want a failed state and chaos on its border or a united Korea allied with the U.S. and troops on its border—after all, that prospect triggered Chinese intervention 70 years ago. How to sync the two governments' visions? An American offer to withdraw troops after the establishment of peace and especially reunification might be one approach.

Out of such discussions might evolve an American offer of sanctions relaxation and security guarantees in exchange for a series of carefully calibrated disarmament steps, with the ultimate objective of denuclearization. Each move would improve stability and peace even if it proved to be the last. Such a process might create opportunities to for the U.S. and China to address other issues mixing security and sovereignty, including competing territorial claims in the Asia-Pacific.

In his uniquely maladroit way, Trump opened diplomatic opportunities with North Korea. Despite Kim's persistently hostile and defiant attitude, the latter responded with greater enthusiasm for the potential of a negotiated settlement than his predecessors. The incoming administration should use this new reality in developing its policy toward the Korean peninsula.

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