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North Korea; The Real Loser in the Afghanistan Crisis?

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Although a superpower should be able to evacuate one nation while negotiating with another, Uncle Sam sometimes finds it difficult to walk and chew gum at the same time. Hence the fear that the Afghan crisis will monopolize the Biden administration's attention and push North Korea onto Washington's policy back-burner.

The Biden administration's withdrawal from Afghanistan was long overdue, at least nineteen years late. The chief challenge today is rescuing not just American and allied citizens, but also Afghans, both those who worked for the United States and those seeking a better life. Bringing the current airlift to a successful conclusion and dealing with the manifold fall-out from the Kabul government's shockingly swift collapse will inevitably be priorities for the president and his chief aides.

However, President Joe Biden should remember the Korean peninsula. So far the administration has expressed its interest in restarting talks, but Kim Jong-un has remained unresponsive. There are many possible explanations for the stalemate. Kim might not believe Biden is serious, or if serious has offered no concessions to make talks worthwhile. Kim might not have unilateral decision-making authority or might have decided to decisively turn the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) against exposure to destabilizing outside ideas and cultures. Perhaps he believes that waiting will make Biden officials anxious, increasing his leverage.

The lack of understanding of Kim's position makes engagement even more important, for intelligence purposes, if nothing else. Doing nothing is not a viable option, since Pyongyang seems likely to continue expanding its missile and nuclear programs. By one estimate it could possess several hundred nuclear weapons within six years. Although not enough for a first strike, such an arsenal would unsettle the global nuclear balance.

What should Biden do? Forget summits for the time being. Rather, try to get a conversation going between the two leaders. Biden should write a "love letter," though with more emphasis on letter than love. The famed dialogue between Kim and Donald Trump was surprisingly substantive, especially from Kim's side.

In particular, North Korea's Supreme Leader appeared forthright in communicating his concerns. The administration would benefit from similar commentary. Moreover, a more diplomatically deft president backed by more sympathetic officials—Trump's national security adviser John Bolton, for one, wanted to bomb rather than engage the North—could use this means to address Kim's concerns. Such exchanges might lead to working-level discussions, however limited.

A related objective should be establishing diplomatic ties, facilitating more regular official contact. The immediate objective would be to encourage negotiations. However, long experience has demonstrated that talks alone guarantee no results. And the United States would gain nothing by abasing itself in a desperate attempt to attract North Korea's interest, rather like South Korea's current approach.

Still, the administration should look at this step as preparing for the future. Diplomatic ties are important for very practical reasons. Rather than treat recognition as a benefit or even reward, which should not be bestowed without a corresponding concession, bilateral ties should be recognized as a communication channel for issues ranging from the mundane to the vital. And the importance of such communication rises with the difficulty of the relationship and the ability of the other party to do harm.

Imagine the Cold War, and especially the Cuban Missile Crisis, without regular diplomatic contact between the Soviet Union and America. In contrast, imagine the impending conventional confrontation between allied and Chinese armies in the Korean War if the People's Republic of China and America had diplomats in their respective capitals. The first could have been disastrous, while the second might have been resolved.

Although the DPRK is not as powerful as either China or Russia, it is capable of wreaking substantial destruction. And if it proceeds with missile and nuclear developments, it could dramatically multiply its capabilities. Kim also has issued impressive wish lists of new weapons. If he eventually deploys even a few of them, the North will have an even more fearsome ability to intimidate, coerce, and deter.

This possibility makes negotiation even more necessary in an attempt to head off such a world. The prospect of North Korea as a mid-level nuclear power if diplomacy fails also makes better communication imperative. And the two governments should start now, making both sides comfortable with such contact, rather than waiting for a crisis to occur.

Washington also should encourage its allies to establish diplomatic links with the North. Most do, but there are a few holdouts. Nothing is gained from such isolation. Of course, the Republic of Korea should have a regular communication channel, and the DPRK might be less likely to blow up an embassy or consulate in one capital or the other than a liaison office in between. Japan also should have contact with the North, despite the many challenging issues between them, including the abduction of Japanese citizens decades ago. France is another diplomatic no-show, in contrast to most European nations, which have formal ties with Pyongyang.

Korea is not the first case of divided countries battling for legitimacy. The West-East German divide blocked East German-U.S. diplomatic relations until 1974. The western Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and the eastern German Democratic Republic finally improved their relationship in the 1970s and the FRG dropped its attempt to prevent other nations from

recognizing its communist counterpart. Whether causation or mere correlation, the GDR actually grew weaker as its diplomatic ties expanded.

With the administration already unenthusiastic about addressing North Korea, the Afghanistan imbroglio could provide a convenient excuse to put the issue off still further. However, attempting the geopolitical equivalent of “kicking the can down the road” would only ensure a bigger and more dangerous North Korean missile and nuclear arsenal. Painful though it might be, there is no better time to address the DPRK and its ever-growing challenge than the present.

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