

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Time to Strike a Diplomatic Deal with China on North Korea

Doug Bandow

September 11, 2017

North Korea's latest nuclear test has pushed the Trump administration into a near frenzy, even though America has lived with the threat of annihilation for more than a half century, starting when the Soviet Union built atomic weapons. The United States relied on deterrence to prevent an attack by Joseph Stalin's tyrannical regime.

A little later Washington also tolerated, albeit reluctantly, Maoist China's entry into the select nuclear club. That prospect was as unsettling as the Kim dynasty gaining control of nuclear weapons. The Johnson administration debated but rejected preventative military strikes.

President Donald Trump seems to be considering taking similar action today, and is making the case very publicly. Yet his blustering and posturing have done more to unsettle America's allies than frighten North Korea. If anything, his behavior has convinced Pyongyang of the need to move more quickly to develop an effective deterrent.

Hopefully, the president's promises of "fire and fury" and threats of military strikes are more rhetorical than real, given the horrendous consequences of triggering the Second Korean War. An isolated and paranoid Pyongyang is likely to view most any U.S. military action as the start of regime change and respond accordingly. A better strategy would be to press for tougher sanctions while offering to negotiate, based on providing security guarantees, international recognition, development assistance and more.

So far, however, President Trump has talked of little other than more penalties, while applying special pressure on the People's Republic of China, which has the greatest economic ties with the North. The moment seems right to enlist the PRC in a sustained effort to at least halt and perhaps roll back Pyongyang's nuclear and programs. The DPRK's latest nuclear test embarrassed President Xi as he was preparing to host a summit of the BRICS states, which is comprised of important emerging economic powers.

In fact, China's relations with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea always have been difficult. These days the two governments barely talk. Over the last five years President Xi Jinping met with South Korea's past president a half dozen times, but not once did he meet with the North's supreme leader, Kim Jong-un. And Beijing has agreed to steadily tighter sanctions, most recently a ban on the DPRK's export of oil, lead and seafood.

Yet so far the Trump administration has failed to recognize that it needs to negotiate with—not dictate to—the PRC. Washington's latest gambit is to push for an immediate vote on forbidding oil sales to the North. Russia's Vladimir Putin already has rejected that proposal. Chinese assent

also is unlikely. Foreign Minister Wang Yi refused to get into specifics, observing that: “Given the new developments on the Korean peninsula, China agrees that the UN Security Council should make a further response and take necessary measures.”

Washington may hope that its demand for an almost immediate vote will embarrass Beijing and win its consent. In the past U.S. diplomats worked with representatives of China, Russia and other Security Council members to craft a measure, which then was assured of passage. In contrast, this time the disagreements are likely to be very public.

An effective ban on oil imports, of which China provides 80 percent, could cripple the North Korean economy, though not necessarily the regime. Despite the North’s talk of Juche, or self-reliance, the DPRK is not energy-independent. However, Kim would protect his military programs and ideological elite while letting economic hardship fall heavily on everyone else. As a result, even a total oil embargo might not be enough to force Pyongyang to change course. In the late 1990s a half million North Koreans died from famine, yet the present ruler’s father did not adopt reforms in response. A similar refusal today is why Russia’s Putin rejected an oil embargo: “They’ll eat grass, but they won’t abandon their program unless they feel secure.”

Moreover, the Chinese have important reasons for not wanting to make the North Koreans eat grass. From Washington’s standpoint, what’s not to like about a DPRK collapse? It would eliminate a longtime, troublesome opponent, erase a Chinese buffer state, strengthen Washington’s ally, the Republic of Korea, and expand U.S. containment of Beijing.

Unsurprisingly, the PRC has a very different perspective. Beijing doesn’t want a national implosion on its border. The result could be millions of refugees flooding across the Yalu River into China, a civil war and fighting that overflows the border, loose nuclear weapons, and other dangerous consequences. Moreover, if the South effectively swallowed the DPRK, China would face a much stronger and nationalistic Korea. One that, if still allied with America, would host U.S. troops, perhaps near China’s border. To prevent such a possibility in 1950 Beijing went to war. Circumstances have changed, but bilateral sensitivities remain, especially since the PRC believes the United States is attempting to contain China with bases, treaties and forces.

The politics also might be dicey for President Xi. He must navigate a party congress next month at which he is expected to win a second term and pack the top party and governing institutions with his allies. North Korea has lost support from academics and the public; social media users go out of their way to mock Pyongyang’s peculiarities, including the role of “Fatty Kim,” an informal sobriquet for the North’s supreme leader. However, the DPRK long has been a special concern of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party, which handles relations among ideological friends. The People’s Liberation Army also traditionally championed the North. Giving in to U.S. pressure and receiving nothing in return wouldn’t enhance Xi’s reputation as he presses his colleagues to renew his authority.

Instead of rushing ahead, as if Kim Jong-un had a mass of ICBMs ready to fire and was plotting a first strike on the American homeland—he does not and is not—the Trump administration should initiate serious discussions with other Security Council members, especially China and Russia. The former’s role would be particularly critical, so the United States should acknowledge Beijing’s interests. The PRC long has blamed the United States for threatening the North and encouraging Pyongyang’s development of nuclear weapons and urged Washington to develop a positive package and talk to the DPRK. The Trump administration should sketch out such an

initiative and indicate its willingness to sit down with the Kim regime to discuss all issues. In doing so, the United States then would urge China's support for the initiative.

The Trump administration also should commit not to use Chinese pressure on the North to Beijing's geopolitical disadvantage. Washington and its allies could, for instance, offer to assist in any messy North Korean implosion, accept Chinese military intervention in the event of a DPRK breakdown, and neutralize a reunited peninsula, as Seoul ended its alliance with America and the United States brought home its troops.

Unfortunately, so far the Trump administration appears convinced that Beijing has an obligation to turn over its one nominal ally in East Asia to America and allow the latter to take full advantage. From Washington's standpoint, nothing less than unconditional surrender appears acceptable. Unsurprisingly, the PRC has refused to go along with Washington's special pleading. Chinese support for a full oil embargo is unlikely. The state-controlled *Global Times* previously suggested the possibility of an oil cut-off, but after the latest nuclear test it urged Beijing to stay out of the controversy: "China should not be at the front of this sharp and complicated situation."

In choosing penalties against—rather than coordination with—the PRC, Washington risks overplaying its hand. For instance, targeting Chinese firms could stiffen Beijing's resistance to imposing potentially regime-ending sanctions on the North. President Trump's refusal to even acknowledge that the PRC has serious reasons for its current policy and assumption that the promise of unnamed trade concessions is sufficient to overcome Beijing's security concerns, discourage China from acting.

Despite the Trump administration's almost histrionic outbursts, the North Korea issue remains largely unchanged from a month or even a year ago. The DPRK is making surprising progress in developing both nuclear weapons and long-range missiles, but still is not in position to attack America. More important, deterrence almost certainly will work against Kim Jong-un, who like his father and grandfather favors virgins in this world rather than the next, as it did against Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong.

This is a good thing, since the chance of stopping the North from gaining a sizeable arsenal of deliverable nukes is slim and shrinking. In time, absent a political miracle, the North it is likely to join such nations as Russia, China and India in possessing the ability to deter U.S. military action with the threat of devastating nuclear retaliation.

The administration's best shot at deterring North Korea would be to mix diplomacy and sanctions in an initiative backed by Beijing. But winning that assistance requires persuasion rather than compulsion. With DPRK-China relations in tatters, now is a good time to press for the PRC's cooperation, which means convincing Beijing that pressing the North further is in China's interest as well as America's interest.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute and a former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World and coauthor of The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea.