

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## How Trump Can Truly 'Solve' the North Korea Challenge

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President Donald Trump and North Korea's Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un are heading toward another summit. Yet Kim's public frustration is rising. In his New Year's Day talk he pledged to "work hard to produce results welcomed by the international community without fail," but threatened to take "a new path for defending the sovereignty of our country and supreme interests of our state" if the United States did not respond to his efforts. The latter could return Northeast Asia to the dangerous polarization of just a year ago.

Denuclearizing North Korea remains a long-shot. The isolated dictatorship is allied with China. It lags far behind South Korea, which is allied with America, the globe's dominant military power. One could argue that it would be irresponsible, from a standpoint of regime survival, for the Kim dynasty not to develop the ultimate deterrent.

Trump is the fifth president to insist that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea cannot be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. The last four presidents failed in that endeavor. However, he is the first president to engage in direct negotiations with the North's leadership. While Kim likely is no more eager than his father and grandfather to disarm, there is evidence that this Kim would prefer to take a more responsible path, which could make Northeast Asia a safer place.

Whether or not that happens will depend on the president's objectives and expectations. It will also depend on, most critically, his willingness to ignore hectoring from just about everyone. He will need to ignore the ever-aggressive neoconservatives, who appear to prefer war as a matter of principle, and uber-nationalists determined to bring the world to heel, antagonist liberals who hate the president more than they support peace. Also, he will need to sidestep a potpourri of analysts who prefer the status quo—U.S. domination, American-run alliance, overseas military deployment—to denuclearization, if the latter requires meaningful concessions. That is, a rather tattered Pax Americana, which could erupt into nuclear war, trumps an imperfect peace, in which Pyongyang reduces its ability and willingness to do harm.

In thinking about what to do with North Korea, it is important to see the issue plain. In particular:

- The Korean Peninsula has lost much of its importance to the United States. Without the Cold War, a fight between North and South would be just that. Neighboring states would be

significantly affected and regional commerce would be disrupted. But no longer is Korea in any way vital to America, part of a global chess game with a hegemonic competitor.

- U.S. involvement no longer is essential for the ROK's defense. South Korea long ago sped past the North economically and could create an overwhelming defense if it chose to do so. China and Russia almost certainly would neither back the DPRK in another aggressive war nor defend it against an American strike.

- North Korean blustering about attacks on America's homeland reflect Washington's military intervention in Northeast Asia. If the United States did not defend the South and threaten North Korea with "fire and fury," to use Trump's words, then Pyongyang would do everything possible to avoid conflict with America. With Washington poised to intervene, the North hopes its increasing capabilities, including the possibility of incinerating a U.S. city or two, are sufficient to deter action by Washington.

- Denuclearization most likely is not an option. The DPRK has invested heavily, financially and politically, in its nuclear arsenal, which offers the only guarantee against a U.S. attempt at regime change. The (apparent) possession of nuclear weapons is what sets North Korea apart from Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and the other small states that fell victim to U.S. military intervention. Irrespective of the love expressed by Trump, Pyongyang would be foolish to trust the United States, especially when its government is run an administration which includes senior officials who advocated unilateral strikes—Muammar el-Qaddafi call your office.

- There is no alternative to negotiation. Sanctions are unlikely to force the DPRK to yield, since the regime already has survived mass starvation. Washington cannot sensibly risk military action, which could trigger full-scale war. Certainly, South Koreans do not believe a fight would be "over there," as Sen. Lindsey Graham bizarrely claimed. The People's Republic of China will calibrate its cooperation, since it desires neither a messy collapse on its border nor reunification, which creates a more powerful U.S. ally and leaves U.S. troops on its border.

- The most important objective is to maintain the peace. The consequences of the first—and hopefully only—Korean War were hideous: millions of casualties and refugees, mass and widespread destruction, hostile relations among regional and world powers. While Washington's military power has substantially increased, the possibility of North Korean biological and nuclear strikes, including beyond the peninsula, create even greater dangers. They are too great to risk except as a last resort.

- Reducing security concerns and making political progress are necessary before any improvement in human rights is likely. Ruling regimes rarely dismantle themselves voluntarily. Systematic internal changes are unlikely so long as Kim and supporting elites feel under threat. However, engagement over human rights could be a useful condition to an offer to open diplomatic relations, for instance.

- Kim offered a road map for denuclearization. Last June's summit statement listed what the North has repeatedly cited as the way forward: improving bilateral relations, creating a peace regime on the peninsula, and then achieving disarmament. That approach makes far more sense for Pyongyang than abandoning its nukes and leverage and hoping for the best, a la el-Qaddafi. If

Kim is willing to disarm, then this is how he will disarm. The president should follow the script in dealing with the DPRK.

- Equally important, in his New Year's Day talk Kim offered a reminder that the perhaps unattainable perfect should not become the enemy of the feasible good. He pledged that "we will not produce, test nor proliferate any more nuclear weapons and have taken practical measures accordingly." These commitments, if backed up with inspections and other forms of verification, would be major steps forward. Objectively, a North Korea that capped and contained its nuclear program and actively engaged the South and the United States is far less fearsome than an isolated and hostile DPRK with an active and growing nuclear arsenal. Indeed, Trump appeared to grasp the essential point: "We're doing really well. Rockets aren't being fired, missiles aren't being fired. We're in no rush."

- Kim appears to have genuinely different objectives than his predecessors. His time in Switzerland did not make him into a liberal: He has ruthlessly consolidated power and eschewed any domestic political liberalization. Nevertheless, he appears committed to economic growth and has initiated significant investments and reforms. Moreover, he obviously enjoys international diplomacy, for which he shows obvious talent. South Korean diplomats believe he is different than his father and grandfather and that he genuinely desires to transform the inter-Korean relationship. Obviously, assessing his intentions remains little more than a guess, but he might be aiming to turn the DPRK into a Northeast Asian version of India, Israel, and Pakistan—nations whose acquisition of nukes was initially criticized but which no longer are viewed as threatening by Washington.

So what to do? Start afresh with a new negotiating strategy. First, maintain denuclearization as the ultimate objective, but set intermediate goals that would enhance security. For instance, create permanent communication channels, make permanent the suspension of missile and nuclear tests, halt nuclear development and production, mothball and destroy missile and nuclear facilities, reduce conventional threats, and more. The United States needs to offer corresponding concessions along the way.

Second, follow Kim's script. He set up wide-ranging official meetings, encouraged cultural, sporting, and other private exchanges, and ended the travel ban (both on Americans going to the DPRK and North Koreans coming to the United States). Offer to initiate diplomatic relations, with the proviso that all issues would be in play, negotiate a treaty formally ending the Korean War, which ended more than sixty-five years ago anyway. At the same time, challenge the North Koreans to respond with steps moving forward on denuclearization. Lock in any concessions, including some of those listed above, while looking for opportunities to encourage full denuclearization.

Third, drop the illusion that Washington can achieve denuclearization for nothing. Washington is filled with analysts, officials, and pundits who imagine that the North can be bludgeoned into disarming without any change to America's very military posture which threatens North Korea. Indeed, there is a strange consensus that it would be better for the U.S. to accept the threat of nuclear war than offer a troop withdrawal in return for denuclearization. Yet Washington's alliances and deployments are supposed to be the means, not the end. Security and peace should be the objectives. The American people might be surprised to learn that those supposedly acting on their behalf prefer to risk the incineration of American cities than give up America's attributes of an imperial power.

Finally, accept an imperfect but improved outcome. Obviously, there are good reasons not to trust the North. But then, Kim would be a fool to trust the United States. A North Korea that looks and acts almost “normal,” like so many other states—brutal toward its own people, but without the saber-rattling of yore—would be a major advance for Northeast Asia. That would be more than the president’s recent predecessors achieved.

Trump took a chance on North Korea. Despite the barbs from his critics, he created opportunities for bilateral and regional détente that did not previously exist. However, he must temper his expectations and moderate his goals. Simply turning the North into a responsible international stakeholder would be a major triumph.

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