

Will North Korea Expect Joe Biden to Pursue a Zombie Policy?

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November 16, 2020

Considerable speculation exists already about how Pyongyang is likely to react to President Donald Trump's defeat and the emergence of Joe Biden as his replacement. Some experts fear that North Korea will seek to test the resolve of the new president by engaging in a provocation of some sort. Resuming nuclear weapons tests or conducting the test of an ICBM would seem to be the most likely options. There is a reasonable case for that concern since Pyongyang has a track record of disruptive behavior during the initial months of a new U.S. administration.

It is more likely, though, that Kim Jong-un's regime will assess Biden's probable policy toward North Korea before taking any precipitous actions. Specifically, Kim will try to determine whether Biden is receptive to a new summit meeting, or if there is any hint that U.S. policy toward the DPRK might be softening. If no signs of accommodation are forthcoming, a splashy provocation to gain U.S. and international attention then becomes highly probable.

Unfortunately, there are few indications that Biden intends to change U.S. policy in a meaningful, constructive way. Indeed, he seems more likely to rescind even the cautious efforts at a rapprochement that Trump pursued and return to the ineffectual zombie policy that previous administrations embraced. The main features of that approach were to isolate North Korea internationally, steadily escalate economic sanctions, and persist in the demand that Pyongyang commit to a complete, verifiable, and irreversible end to its nuclear weapons program before negotiations on other matters can take place. Washington persisted in that strategy for nearly three decades with utterly sterile results.

Biden's statements during the 2020 presidential campaign offer little hope that he intends to do anything other than return to the status quo ante and continue that zombie policy. In January, Biden stated that there was "no way" that he would agree to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-un without "preconditions"—meaning the firm commitment to denuclearization. During the final presidential debate, he stated specifically that he would meet with Kim only "on the condition that he would be drawing down his nuclear capacity." Biden's overall attitude regarding the desirability of bilateral negotiations actually seemed to harden. He accused Trump of having "legitimized" the North Korean regime by even meeting with Kim, and of cozying up to a "thug" who was similar to Hitler. Such blistering rhetoric is unlikely to facilitate productive negotiations with Pyongyang.

If the new president wants to forestall a crisis and prevent tensions on the Korean Peninsula from soaring, he must adopt a very different approach. Instead of continuing to insist that Pyongyang implement denuclearization as a precondition for a grudging, partial lifting of sanctions and tepid moves toward normalization of relations, U.S. policymakers need to view normalization as a process that might eventually culminate in denuclearization. In other words, U.S. leaders have gotten the sequence of necessary diplomatic steps backward, and Biden shows every inclination to perpetuate that futility.

The potential consequences of doing so are deeply alarming. North Korea is not going to give up its nukes for paper promises of meager concessions regarding sanctions. Instead, it will proceed to build an ever larger and more sophisticated nuclear arsenal. By the end of Biden's term in January 2025, Pyongyang could well have as many as 50 to 60 operational nuclear weapons, instead of the estimated 10 to 15 that it now possesses. Kim would have no incentive to slow, much less freeze or reverse that process. Likewise, North Korea will likely continue perfecting its ballistic missiles in terms of both range and reliability.

Thus, a zombie policy is likely to culminate with North Korea having a sizable arsenal of nuclear weapons, consisting of miniaturized warheads atop sophisticated missiles, some of which would be able to reach the American homeland. At that point, the United States would face a serious nuclear-weapons power with whom it has nothing even resembling a normal relationship. Washington either would have to accept such a dangerous situation or resort to preemptive military action (with all of its horrifying dangers) in a desperate attempt to prevent such an outcome. Either course would be appallingly bad from the standpoint of American interests. Only a bold strategy to normalize relations with Pyongyang can forestall such an awful choice. One hopes that President Biden will find the necessary wisdom to end the zombie phase of U.S. policy toward North Korea.

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