



America's options to change tack on North Korea

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March 7, 2017

North Korea's launch of four ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan on the morning of March 6 is the latest incident in an increasingly volatile situation. Since the missiles flew some 1000 kilometers, they would qualify as intermediate range, confirming Pyongyang's growing sophistication with that technology. Three of the four missiles landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone, and Tokyo was quick to express outrage. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe stated that the latest launches "clearly demonstrate evidence of a new threat from North Korea."

Observers are speculating about the Trump administration's likely response to the escalation of tensions in Northeast Asia. Even before this latest incident, Trump and his advisers were sending mixed signals regarding North Korea. During the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump had indicated that he might be willing to talk directly to the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un and seek to dampen tensions. In early March, however, reports began circulating that the administration was pondering the use of military force against Pyongyang's nuclear and missile installations, and perhaps would even consider a full-blown regime change war to oust Kim's horrid dictatorship.

One point is abundantly clear. The strategy that the United States and its allies have pursued over the past quarter century regarding North Korea has failed miserably. That strategy consists of ever-tightening, multilateral economic sanctions to isolate that country, combined with vague promises that sanctions would be relaxed and Pyongyang would enjoy opportunities for more normal relations if it abandoned its nuclear and missile ambitions. Repeated nuclear weapons tests and an accelerating number of missile launches demonstrate Pyongyang's contempt for the existing strategy. There is no evidence whatever that the current approach will work any better in the future than it has to this point.

That disturbing reality leaves the United States with only a few options. One would be to adopt the advice of extreme hawks and conduct air strikes on North Korea's nuclear and missile facilities. The Trump administration's apparent flirtation with that course is not the first time Washington has done so. Following the initial indications of an active North Korean nuclear program in the early 1990s, the Clinton administration - especially Secretary of Defense William Perry - came close to adopting that measure. Indeed, had it not been for former President Jimmy Carter's successful, free-lance diplomatic efforts to defuse the situation at the last minute in 1994, it is more likely than not that the administration would have resorted to force.

The risks inherent in attacking North Korea are obvious and alarming, unless one assumes that Pyongyang would passively accept the resulting destruction and humiliation. Moreover, even if Washington and its allies assured the angry North Koreans that the strikes were solely for the purpose of neutralizing the nuclear and missile programs, they would be unlikely to believe such assurances. The United States has pursued too many previous forcible regime-change ventures to have the slightest credibility that it would refrain from doing so in this case. Believing that it has nothing more to lose by retaliating, North Korea could execute its often-expressed threat to turn South Korea's capital and main metropolitan area, Seoul, into a "sea of fire." Given North Korea's extensive artillery firepower, and Seoul's vulnerable location (barely 50 kilometers from the Demilitarized Zone separating North and South Korea), the destruction and human suffering would be massive.

Because military strikes would risk a calamity, some experts have advocated the opposite course, engaging North Korea and trying to reach a comprehensive accord regarding the various sources of tension on the Peninsula. Pyongyang's principal demands have been the lifting of economic sanctions, the normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States, an end to the annual war games that the U.S. and South Korean militaries conduct, replacing the 1953 Armistice with a peace treaty ending the state of war, and the withdrawal of U.S. forces from South Korea.

Some of those concessions Washington can and should be willing to grant. For instance, diplomatic recognition of a regime, however repulsive, that has existed for six decades would be merely an exercise in foreign policy realism. Likewise, an end to the annual bilateral military exercises with Seoul would cost the United States very little. It would remove a key justification (or pretext) that Pyongyang has cited for its own provocative actions, such as the recent missile launches. Other demands, including the withdrawal of U.S. troops and the negotiation of a peace treaty, would be far more delicate and difficult. But officials will never know if an accord is possible if they don't at least negotiate seriously with the North Koreans.

There are reasonable objections to a conciliatory approach, though. Most notably, the North Korean regime does not have a good reputation for being trustworthy. There is a real danger that Pyongyang could simply pocket the concessions and continue to advance its nuclear and missile programs.

The final - and most desirable - option for the United States would be to limit America's risk exposure to North Korea's dangerous and unpredictable behavior. That would mean "outsourcing" responsibility for dealing with Pyongyang's actions to North Korea's neighbors - China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia. Given their geographic proximity, those are the nations that are most affected by, and should be most concerned by, Pyongyang's conduct. And yet, the United States, a nation several thousand miles away, has been expected to take the lead in dealing with the North Korean threat.

Washington should immediately inform all four capitals that those days have come to an end. North Korea is a disruptive element in Northeast Asia, and it is past time for the powers in that region to take responsibility for addressing the problem. True, the United States has repeatedly pressed China to exert greater pressure on its troublesome North Korean ally. But without resorting to drastic measures, such as terminating food and energy assistance to Pyongyang, even

Beijing's influence is limited. Too many Western pundits and policymakers overestimate China's clout. Beijing remains reluctant to adopt truly harsh measures because such steps might destabilize the North Korean state, producing massive refugee flows and other undesirable results. Chinese leaders also face the unpleasant prospect that if the North Korean state imploded, Beijing would face a U.S. alliance with a united Korea and even the possibility of American military bases in what is now North Korea.

Washington has apparently done nothing to assure Beijing that it would not exploit the situation to establish such a military presence on China's border. Nor has there been an initiative to give Chinese officials meaningful incentives to incur the risks entailed in coercing North Korea. There are possible policy concessions that U.S. leaders could offer on such issues as Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the Korean Peninsula itself, but there is yet no sign of a willingness to consider such an approach.

A policy change of some sort is essential, however. The current strategy is utterly bankrupt, and if nothing else is done, the United States will soon be on the front lines of a confrontation with a volatile North Korea possessing both a sizable nuclear arsenal and a capable delivery system. That is an outcome no one should welcome.

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