



Biden Needs To Embrace New Thinking on North Korea

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An especially frustrating aspect of the defense and foreign policy team that Joe Biden is assembling is the pervasive view among its members that U.S. foreign policy was in splendid shape before Donald Trump became president. Given that comforting delusion, it's not surprising that their "solution" is merely to restore the status quo ante – return US policy to what it was under Barack Obama. Given the train wreck that actually characterized the Obama administration's foreign policy, it is a very dangerous assumption. Obama and his minions managed to launch three new, disastrous US military interventions in the Middle East – Libya, Syria and Yemen. They also perpetuated the seemingly endless war in Afghanistan and reversed an initial decision to exit the Iraq quagmire.

The administration's performance was not much better elsewhere. By meddling in Ukraine's internal affairs to help unseat the elected, pro-Russia president, Washington further poisoned already fragile relations with Moscow. Tensions also continued to escalate with China, as the United States sought to execute a "strategic pivot" to East Asia, characterized by a buildup of US forces in the region and a surge of "freedom of navigation" patrols by the US Navy in the contested South China Sea.

Given that track record, merely returning to the policy status quo ante is a spectacularly bad idea. Nowhere is the need for meaningful change more urgent than with respect to Washington's policy toward North Korea. Obama did little more than keep on autopilot the longstanding, sterile US strategy of trying to isolate the North Korean regime and compel it to relinquish its nuclear weapons. If Biden embraces that approach, we could be heading for a nasty confrontation with nuclear implications. New thinking and a new strategy is imperative.

Unfortunately, Biden and the Democratic Party as a whole show no signs of flexibility or creativity about policy toward North Korea. Indeed, the prevailing attitude has been profoundly reactionary and confrontational. Prominent Democrats, including Biden, even condemned Donald Trump for his modest efforts to promote a rapprochement with Pyongyang. Some of them denounced the president's willingness even to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un, contending that according Kim such an honor implicitly "legitimized" his brutal dictatorship. President Trump "elevated North Korea to the level of the United States while preserving the regime's status quo," intoned then-House minority leader Nancy Pelosi. Sen. Chris Murphy (D-CT) later exuded outrage in a tweet that Trump favored continuing a dialogue with such a

monstrous leader. "It's simply heartbreaking to know tonight that [Kim's] biggest global cheerleader is the President of the United States of America."

More recent comments from Biden himself offer little cause for optimism. In January 2020, he stated that there was "no way" he would agree to meet Kim without "preconditions" – meaning an ironclad commitment to denuclearization. During the final presidential debate with Trump, Biden stated specifically that he would meet with Kim only "on the condition that he would be drawing down his nuclear capacity."

If the new president wants to prevent a crisis, he must adopt a very different approach. Instead of continuing the futile quest of insisting that North Korea implement denuclearization as a precondition for a grudging, partial lifting of sanctions and tepid moves toward more normal relations, Washington should pursue the full normalization of relations with Pyongyang. Such a move would greatly reduce the dangerous, ongoing tensions.

Above all, Biden must spurn the advice of hawks (including some in his own party) who would not shy away from a military confrontation with North Korea. Unfortunately, a flirtation with that option goes all the way back to Bill Clinton's administration. In early 1994, officials were furious when North Korea blocked international inspectors from certifying Pyongyang's adherence to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. There was growing evidence that the North Koreans were processing plutonium from a reactor at Yongbyon, and may have already extracted enough fissile material to build two bombs.

In his memoirs, Clinton described his administration's reaction to those developments. "I was determined to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear arsenal, even at the risk of war." He had Secretary of Defense William Perry convey that message in the strongest terms in comments to a group of newspaper reporters and editors. Clinton added: "In order to make absolutely certain that the North Koreans knew we were serious, Perry continued the tough talk over the next three days, even saying we would not rule out a preemptive military strike."

They were not making idle threats. Perry later confirmed that the administration seriously considered conducting "surgical strikes" against North Korea's nuclear installations. The world was perilously close to witnessing another armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula. Only a special diplomatic mission headed by former president Jimmy Carter forestalled a potentially horrific conflict by negotiating an accord.

Contemplating the military option would be even more perilous today. In 1994, Pyongyang's nuclear program was in its infancy and the regime was years away from building operational nuclear weapons. Now, North Korea possesses an estimated 10 to 15 such weapons and likely will have 50 to 60 by the end of Biden's term in January 2025. Likewise, North Korea will likely continue perfecting its ballistic missiles in terms of both range and reliability. Those missiles are already capable of reaching the North American continent.

Without the normalization of relations, the danger of a catastrophic confrontation will continue to grow. Normalization includes the establishment of embassies in both countries, a treaty formally ending the Korean War, and the lifting of economic sanctions. Normalization also requires Washington to assure Pyongyang that it is out of the forcible regime-change business. One of the main reasons why North Korean leaders have doggedly continued to build a nuclear

deterrent is that they saw how Washington treated non-nuclear adversaries such as Serbia, Iraq, and Libya.

Returning to the Obama era policy of issuing impotent demands that Pyongyang give up its nukes is not only pointless, it's potentially lethal. President Biden needs to adopt an entirely different approach.

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