



Will the Thaw in Relations between the Two Koreas Prevent a New War?

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The recent reduction in tensions between the Republic of Korea (ROK) and Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) is almost palpable. That thaw was especially evident with the cordial atmosphere at the Winter Olympics. Not only did Pyongyang send a team to participate in the games, and march into the stadium along with the South Korean team under a special joint flag during the opening ceremonies, but North Korean dictator Kim Jong Un's sister, Kim Jo Yong, was an honored guest in the dignitaries box. During the proceedings, the North Korean government invited South Korean President Moon Jae-in to visit Pyongyang, and there are now prospects for bilateral talks to reopen the joint economic complex at Kaesong. Even before the Olympics, a warming relationship between the two Koreas was apparent, as Moon sought to defuse the worrisome tensions on the Peninsula.

China and others have welcomed the thaw in relations between the two Koreas and hope that it will become the foundation for progress in reducing the danger of war. Unfortunately, improved inter-Korean relations do little to resolve the core issue in the ongoing North Korea crisis: the impasse between the United States and the DPRK over the latter's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Moreover, the Trump administration does not seem entirely pleased with the embryonic rapprochement between the two Koreas. Vice President Mike Pence ostentatiously snubbed Kim Yo Jong during the opening ceremonies at the Olympics, even though she was seated barely three feet away from him. And although the administration indicated a willingness to consider participating in preliminary talks with North Korea, there was little evidence of enthusiasm for that step.

Indeed, Washington appears firmly committed to maintaining an uncompromising stance regarding the issue of Pyongyang's nuclear and missile ambitions. In early February, U.S. special envoy Joseph Yun reiterated that all options (implicitly including military force) remain on the table—although he did state his belief that peaceful options were not yet on the brink of exhaustion. More ominous was the comment of a senior member of Congress that Secretary of State Rex Tillerson might have only 8 to 10 months to resolve the North Korea crisis through diplomacy.

The crucial point is that Washington, not Seoul, controls the decision regarding war or peace toward North Korea. ROK leaders are either oblivious to that reality or refuse to acknowledge its potentially horrific implications. President Moon insists that his government has an “absolute right to veto” a decision by Washington to attack North Korea. If he believes that, he is being extremely naïve.

The current U.S. administration made it clear that there is no possibility of accepting a nuclear-armed North Korea and relying on a policy of deterrence. The DPRK, in part because it fears Washington’s track record of regime-change wars, shows no inclination to relinquish its growing nuclear arsenal, which it regards as the one credible deterrent to ensure regime survival. It is hard to see how such irreconcilable positions can be resolved peacefully.

Pyongyang’s nuclear capabilities, combined with the increasing range of its missiles, has intensified Washington’s agitation. Experts now estimate that America’s west coast cities are within striking range and that the entire American homeland will be in that position within a few years or even months. Trump administration officials and most other Americans consider such a prospect intolerable, and American leaders may well take decisive action before the North Korean threat reaches that point.

Any U.S. decision to use force will be made on the basis of the perceived need to repel a mortal threat to the security of the American people. The welfare of South Koreans will be a secondary consideration, at best. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), an extremely influential member of the U.S. Senate, made that point emphatically. He expressed his support for striking North Korea to stop it from developing the capability to reach the United States with a missile — even if launching a preventive attack came at a huge cost for South Korea and the rest of the region. “It would be terrible, but the war would be over [in South Korea], it wouldn’t be here,” Graham said in an interview with NBC.

His stance is hardly unprecedented. The United States came close to taking drastic action in 1994, when evidence emerged that Pyongyang was processing plutonium for a nuclear-weapons program. In his memoirs, President Bill Clinton stated that. “I was determined to prevent North Korea from developing a nuclear arsenal, even at the risk of war.” Secretary of Defense William Perry later confirmed that the administration considered conducting “surgical strikes” against North Korea’s embryonic nuclear installations.

Fortunately, former President Jimmy Carter convinced Clinton to let him conduct talks with North Korean leader Kim Il Sung to resolve the crisis peacefully. But it was a close call, and at no time did Clinton or his advisers hint that South Korea’s wishes would have a major influence on Washington’s decision about launching air strikes. Seoul certainly would not have had a veto over U.S. policy.

President Trump is even less likely to give precedence to South Korea’s interests or wishes. If Washington decides to launch military strikes to eliminate Kim’s perceived nuclear and missile threats to America’s security, there is no indication that Seoul could veto the decision— notwithstanding Moon’s assumptions. Harry Kazianis, executive editor at the National Interest, is correct that the inter-Korean dialogue and friendly atmospherics surrounding the Olympics are a sideshow and a distraction. Those developments do not alter the nature of Pyongyang’s strategic ambitions or its behavior regarding the nuclear and ballistic missile issues. Nor do

flashy displays of inter-Korean goodwill ease Washington's concerns about a growing North Korean threat, including one to the American homeland.

The United States could still head off a disaster that might engulf the Korean Peninsula and beyond. But it would require Washington to embrace the suggestion that Beijing has pushed for years: wide-ranging U.S.-DPRK negotiations without preconditions. The North Korean nuclear and missile programs would need to be on such an agenda, but so would the lifting of U.S. and international economic sanctions, the willingness to negotiate a treaty formally ending the state of war on the Peninsula, U.S. establishment of diplomatic relations with the DPRK, the ending of the annual joint military exercises between U.S. and South Korean forces, and the gradual withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea. China's attempt to facilitate such bilateral negotiations is constructive, but there is little indication that the Trump administration will follow Beijing's advice.

One hopes that war can still be averted, but the situation is ominous. South Korea may discover the inherent, potentially tragic, drawback of relying on the security protection that a distant great power provides. Crucial decisions about the ROK's future will be made in Washington, not Seoul.

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