

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

North Korea's New Arduous March: What Biden Should Do (And Not Do)

Ted Galen Carpenter

April 18, 2021

Kim's language conveys a tacit admission that North Korea's chronic policy of self-isolation has not served the country, or the regime, particularly well. Minimizing interaction with the outside world did not even shield North Korea from the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic.

Kim Jong-Un's downbeat and surprisingly candid comments on April 9 caught many U.S. and international observers by surprise. North Korea's leader called on officials to brace for a prolonged campaign (an "arduous march") to tackle the country's worsening economic problems, comparing the current crisis to the 1990s famine that claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. He placed much of the blame on the effects of U.S.-led sanctions, but he also conceded that the coronavirus pandemic had taken a major toll.

Kim's admission creates an occasion for the Biden administration to make a fundamental choice about the direction of its policy toward North Korea. Advocates of a hardline policy could see Kim's comments as an opening to increase U.S. pressure on the regime, concluding that it is now exceptionally vulnerable. Such a strategy would include adopting even more robust sanctions and being even less willing than previous administration to show any flexibility on Washington's long-standing demand that Pyongyang agrees to a complete, verifiable, and irreversible end to its nuclear weapons program. Although that approach might seem tempting, given the new signs of North Korean weakness and vulnerability, it would be a serious, potentially tragic, mistake.

Indeed, the Biden foreign policy team should adopt the opposite approach. Kim's language conveys a tacit admission that North Korea's chronic policy of self-isolation has not served the country, or the regime, particularly well. Minimizing interaction with the outside world did not even shield North Korea from the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic.

That realization may well make Kim more receptive to productive negotiations on an array of issues. The Biden administration should seize that opportunity by making timely concessions and seeking to achieve some attainable goals. The demand for complete denuclearization, though, is not on the list of such goals; it remains, as it always has, a poison pill that terminates any prospects for constructive diplomacy.

A key timely concession would be the easing of economic sanctions. In addition to being one creative component of a wiser foreign policy, such a move would constitute basic humanitarianism—especially if North Korea is facing a crisis comparable to the horrible famine of the 1990s. That concession also would facilitate negotiations on other important issues.

Beyond easing sanctions, the Biden administration should propose a major breakthrough on the normalization of bilateral relations. One step would be to finalize a treaty to replace the 1953 armistice and formally end the state of war on the Korean Peninsula. Another would be to establish formal diplomatic relations, open embassies in Pyongyang and Washington, and appoint ambassadors to those new posts. As an additional confidence-building measure, the administration should propose an indefinite freeze on U.S.-South Korean military exercises and a large reduction in the number of U.S. troops stationed in South Korea in exchange for a freeze on the North's nuclear and ballistic missile tests and a pullback of North Korean troops and weaponry from the Demilitarized Zone.

Such an agenda would not have the resonance of the dramatic demand for North Korea's total denuclearization, but it would have the virtue of being feasible. Even achieving a portion of those pragmatic goals would significantly reduce the dangerous, heavily armed stand-off on the Peninsula. Kim's speech tests whether the Biden foreign policy team is perceptive enough to see an opportunity for conciliation and diplomatic progress or instead embraces a myopic strategy of trying to increase pressure on a beleaguered regime.

*Ted Galen Carpenter, a senior fellow in security studies at the Cato Institute and a contributing editor at the National Interest, is the author of 12 books and more than 900 articles on international affairs. His books include (with Doug Bandow) *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (Palgrave Macmillan)*