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Stuck in a rut

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As he marks his first year in office, President Joe Biden's North Korea policy is failing for a number of reasons. His administration, after conducting a policy review on North Korea, had promised a "careful, calibrated approach" toward persuading Pyongyang ultimately to give up its nuclear program.

However, nothing has happened. Washington and Pyongyang are not talking with each other despite the Biden administration's repeated statements that it sought "serious and sustained diplomacy" with North Korea and is willing to meet its representatives "anytime, anywhere, [and] without preconditions."

Indeed, there are signs of deterioration as North Korea hints that it could soon resume nuclear and long-range missile tests that it suspended in 2018 after former President Donald Trump began engaging with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un.

There are several reasons given for the stalemate. One is that North Korea has been distracted by its own draconian response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has seen it close the country to the outside world due to strict quarantine measures. This situation may be one reason for Pyongyang's non-responsiveness to the diplomatic overtures from Washington and Seoul.

Nonetheless, another explanation is that the Biden Administration has been unwilling to ease sanctions on North Korea until it takes concrete steps to abandon its nuclear weapons program. As a result, the White House has shown little urgency on engaging with Pyongyang. North Korea on the other hand, appears reluctant to resume negotiations unless Washington first makes a goodwill gesture on the sanctions issue or supports other efforts to reduce tensions such as publicly backing President Moon Jae-in's push for an "end of war" declaration.

Possible developments now threaten to create a vicious circle that could harden positions on both sides. North Korea's recent short-range missile launches suggest that Kim Jung-un might be willing to revive a policy of brinkmanship to grab Biden's attention and gain concessions as Pyongyang struggles to recover from its self-imposed quarantine.

If that is Kim's strategy, it appears to have backfired. The Biden administration is already threatening to expand sanctions on North Korea in response to the short-range missile tests. A more interesting question is what Washington's response would be if North Korea decided to conduct a nuclear test while the U.S. is preoccupied with the possible Russian invasion of

Ukraine.

Such a dire situation underscores the need for more imaginative thinking in Washington. For all his faults, Trump did try such a different approach when he met Kim in Singapore in 2018. Their Singapore Declaration offered the promise of a resolution of North Korea's nuclear issue. Any deal, however, was derailed at a later meeting in Hanoi by Trump's "neo-con" advisers, such as National Security Adviser John Bolton, who pushed for an "all or nothing" bargain after Kim asked for major sanctions relief in return for partial denuclearization measures.

A hardline approach on North Korea is the default setting within Washington's foreign policy establishment despite a track record showing that such a strategy has achieved little. Their prescription of more sanctions and increased military pressure has only resulted in providing a rationale for Pyongyang to bolster its nuclear and missile arsenal.

Their justification for favoring a hawkish position is that it has been difficult to create sustained trust and dialogue since Pyongyang has sometimes broken its promises, although the same criticism has also been leveled at the United States. "No one wants to be seen as having been 'played' by the North Koreans," one former senior U.S. negotiator on North Korea told me.

Since the 1990s, the U.S. has sought a quid-pro-quo process in dealing with North Korea, but American officials have often been reluctant to compromise too much due to fears of being accused of being weak. Officials who buck the consensus run the risk of being ostracized from the Washington establishment.

The Korean policy establishment in Washington is rather small and is confined to those who are regarded as experts because of their prior government experience. Yet membership also depends on staying within the bounds of prevailing mainstream policy ideas even when earlier positions they might have pushed turned out to be wrong.

There is a very narrow range of acceptable opinion on North Korea among the foreign policy elite, which is set in part by the military-industrial complex that helps finance the leading national security think tanks in Washington. Some Korea experts, such as those associated with the libertarian think tanks Cato Institute and Quincy Institute, have challenged the conventional wisdom. However, their voices are often ignored by decision makers because they fail to adhere fully to the foundational cornerstones of postwar U.S. policy on Korea.

Washington suffers from a lack of diverse viewpoints on North Korea that could otherwise stimulate fresh thinking that might break the current deadlock.