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Diplomacy needed

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In Trump's White House, diplomacy takes a back seat to military confrontation. And by back seat, I mean the chair has been unhinged and kicked out the rear exit of the bus.

International politics is a tough, anarchic, honor-driven world that incentivizes leaders to use force to resolve disputes instead of negotiate with their adversaries. Military action is associated with strength and shrewdness, whereas negotiations bear the pall of weakness and naivety.

But diplomacy is precisely what today's most pressing international disputes need. It is cheap, humane and typically produces far more stable results than war.

In Syria and Iraq, Trump has given carte blanche to the military to devise policy and use force. This has resulted, unsurprisingly, in an increasingly militarized approach to the conflict, a more than 20 percent increase in the number of bombs dropped, and a multiplying number of opportunities for dangerous escalation of war with the Assad regime and its backers, Iran and Russia.

Meanwhile, not a single word has been offered in support of the Russia-led Syrian peace talks in Astana, Kazakhstan, or even the U.N.-sponsored talks in Geneva. Encouraging any kind of negotiation appears nowhere on the Trump agenda.

Now, the Islamic State's days are numbered. The extremist group is beset on all sides by enemies. It's being bombed and attacked by the United States, Kurdish militias, Iranian forces, Russia, and the Assad regime. It has lost territory, manpower and resources. But none of this will resolve the fundamental problems plaguing Iraq and Syria.

Only negotiations can produce a sustainable solution that ends the violence and creates a lasting political agreement. That may mean tolerating some ugly arrangements, like the continuation of the Assad regime's rule, or greater Russian and Iranian influence in Syria. But the alternative is just more war and death and suffering.

On North Korea, Washington's approach is similarly militarized. Trump seems to have abandoned trying to get China to use its leverage over the North to halt Pyongyang's saber rattling and nuclear weapons tests. Instead, the president has emphasized ostentatious shows of force off the North Korean coast and vague threats of military action. Revamping negotiations is apparently off the table.

Contrary to the dominant thinking in Washington, D.C., the coercive tactics the United States uses against North Korea have little utility. For decades, Washington has blended economic

sanctions with military encirclement and routine threats of preventive war. The result is a bolder, more defiant, nuclear-armed North Korea.

Trump initially had the right instinct, saying once during the campaign that he wouldn't hesitate to talk with North Korea's Kim Jong Un. That policy seems to have been abandoned, partly due to the widespread conception of the North Korean regime as dangerous, untrustworthy and irrational.

Even if all that were true, it wouldn't make sanctions and military confrontation better options than negotiating. Conservative estimates of the human costs of war on the Korean peninsula predict up to a million deaths, and that's if it doesn't go nuclear. Short of war, the hawkish approach only pushes Pyongyang to greater rigidity and antagonism.

But more to the point, negotiations can actually work. The U.S.-North Korean deal worked out by the Clinton administration in 1994, called the Agreed Framework, worked pretty well until 2002 when George W. Bush designated North Korea part of the "Axis of Evil," and Pyongyang dropped out of the agreement to pursue a nuclear deterrent in earnest.

To this day, North Korea insists it will make concessions on its nuclear weapons program if the United States first signs a peace treaty to end its "hostile policy." Promising not to attack could easily turn the temperature down. Pledging further to lift sanctions and help provide the North with nuclear energy in exchange for limitations on its weapons development could be the right set of incentives to reach a lasting agreement with Pyongyang.

Barack Obama, as both a candidate and president, caught flak for saying his administration would talk to Iran "without preconditions." In the end, this openness to peaceful negotiation resulted in Iran agreeing to submit itself to the most restrictive non-proliferation agreement in the world and effectively took the U.S. and Iran off the path to war.

The Trump administration, by contrast, has denigrated the Iran nuclear deal, actively confronted Iranian-backed forces fighting the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and even made whispers about regime change. This approach is wildly effective in bolstering the hardliners in Iran and in bogging the United States down in an increasingly unstable Middle East, but not much else.

Diplomacy is hard. It requires political leaders to resist the temptation to appear tough by refusing to negotiate with evil. It requires compromise in the service of peace. It may not work, but given the alternative — increasing belligerence and war — it's certainly worth a try.

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