



## Commentary: There's still time for diplomacy in Korea

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Amid ever-heightening tensions over North Korea's nuclear weapons program, there are finally some positive diplomatic signals. On Jan. 3, Pyongyang reopened a long-closed border hotline with South Korea – one day after Seoul proposed bilateral negotiations and two days after Kim Jong Un said in his New Year address that he was open to speaking with the South.

Yet when asked about this possible breakthrough, United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley threw cold water on the whole idea: “We won't take any of the talk seriously if they don't do something to ban all nuclear weapons in North Korea.”

Haley's statement is as clear an articulation of the Trump administration's foreign policy as you can get: Diplomacy is a waste of time; we will only talk to adversaries after they unilaterally capitulate and obey all our commands. The problem is that this approach is rarely effective. Sure, sometimes diplomacy fails, but more often than not, blustery intimidation elicits nothing but bluster and resistance in return.

Consider Washington's post-World War Two approach to the Soviet Union. According to the historian Melvyn P. Leffler, there was “nearly universal agreement” in the military and intelligence communities that the Soviet Union, though expansionist, “was by no means uniformly hostile or unwilling to negotiate with the United States.” Yet, in contrast to the internal consensus, Leffler cites U.S. officials increasingly depicting Moscow as “constitutionally incapable of being conciliated” and hell-bent on “world domination.”

In July 1947, a War Department intelligence report found the Truman administration's more confrontational approach “tend[ed] to magnify the significance of conflicting points of view, and reduc[ed] the possibility of agreement on any point.” According to Leffler, this “had resulted in a more aggressive Soviet attitude toward the United States and had intensified tensions.”

By contrast, history is replete with examples of tactful statecraft successfully yielding major concessions from adversaries.

Although the Cuban missile crisis had for decades been misrepresented as an example of a steely-eyed American president staring down a retreating Soviet Union, the truth was later revealed in declassified documents. John F. Kennedy secretly offered to withdraw U.S. missiles from Turkey, while Russia's Nikita Khrushchev agreed to take the missiles out of Cuba in exchange. Nuclear war was averted through diplomacy and mutual concessions.

President Barack Obama's approach to Iran was successful because it followed this diplomatic model. For years, Washington approached Iran with obstinate condemnations, extreme demands, and little interest in serious negotiations. This all-sticks-no-carrots posture resulted in stubborn hostility on both sides and an expanding Iranian nuclear program. Only when the Obama administration conceded Iran's right to peaceful civilian nuclear enrichment and offered sanctions relief did Tehran agree to major restrictions on its nuclear program. This resulted in what Yukiya Amano, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, describes as "the world's most robust nuclear verification regime."

So why is Trump ignoring his predecessor's example? A popular argument against the prospect of rapprochement with North Korea is that we tried diplomacy in the 1990s and Pyongyang took advantage of American overtures and failed to live up to its commitments.

But that is an incredibly misleading representation of the 1994 Agreed Framework. Negotiated by the Clinton administration, the Agreed Framework froze Pyongyang's plutonium pathway to a nuclear bomb and opened its program up to inspections in exchange for economic and diplomatic concessions from Washington. Unfortunately, according to Stanford University's Siegfried S. Hecker, many in Congress opposed the deal and "failed to appropriate funds for key provisions of the pact, causing the United States to fall behind in its commitments almost from the beginning."

Pyongyang took this as a signal that it needed a back-up plan. Early in the George W. Bush administration, which took a markedly tougher line from the start, U.S. intelligence found Pyongyang was secretly developing uranium enrichment capabilities, which violated the spirit, though not the letter, of the Agreed Framework. The Bush team pulled out of the deal in response, prompting Pyongyang to expel international inspectors.

In 2002, Bush put North Korea in the infamous "Axis of Evil", which strongly implied a future regime change effort. Pyongyang soon after withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and only a few years later, the Kim regime tested its first nuclear weapon.

Diplomatic efforts have a better track record, even with North Korea. North Korea tends to respond to toughness and attempts at coercion with its own set of belligerent policies. However, over the past 25 years, according to a study by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, periods of diplomacy correlate with a reduction in North Korean provocations. Simply put, the Trump administration's central premise on North Korea is wrong. More threats and pressure won't elicit surrender from Pyongyang. In fact, the estimated costs of war are so catastrophically high that military threats at this point are probably not credible. The CIA assesses "no amount of economic sanctions will force the North Korean leader, Kim Jong Un, to give up his country's nuclear program."

Diplomatic options are readily available. Americans involved in low-level discussions with North Korea have repeatedly said Pyongyang is willing to negotiate. Russia and China have long insisted that the best first step to constructive diplomacy is an initial "freeze for freeze" agreement, in which Pyongyang would agree to freeze its weapons testing in exchange for a halt to all U.S.-South Korean military exercises. While U.S. military commanders do not support a total freeze, South Korea has suggested postponing some exercises until after the Olympics. In addition, Washington could easily halt its provocative – and superfluous – overflight operations near North Korea.

The exact outlines of a deal would have to be defined at the negotiating table, when each side can communicate its own expectations and flexibility. But the United States has wide latitude to satisfy North Korean security concerns, including offering an end to what Pyongyang calls Washington's "hostile policy," sanctions relief, or even a reduction in U.S. troop levels in South Korea. The latter may appeal to China, which could motivate a more constructive Chinese approach to the North Korean problem.

Nothing about the current situation on the Korean peninsula forces us to take an exclusively hardline approach. Only pride, honor, and terribly wrong ideas about diplomacy prevent a more sensible approach.

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