



Would Trump accept North Korea as a nuclear power?

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With North Korea — at least for the moment — unwilling to commit to a plan to give up its nuclear weapons, would the Trump administration ever consider a more radical approach?

Would Team Trump ponder allowing Kim Jong Un to keep his nuclear arsenal as part of a bigger strategic move in Asia, combating the rising power and influence of China?

While I can't say this is my preferred strategy to contain a North Korean nuclear program that might have as many as 65 warheads in its arsenal, there is a rationale to at least consider a very different policy solution to a problem that has been growing for decades.

But before we consider living with a nuclear North Korea, let us take stock of the alternatives if, in coming weeks, Pyongyang will not start down the path of denuclearization.

On the extreme end of the spectrum there is, of course, the possibility of military action. The challenge is that, even with the world's most powerful armed forces, short of perhaps a nuclear-first strike, the Pentagon cannot guarantee the destruction of Kim's nuclear arsenal. Even if it could, the North still could strike Seoul and Tokyo with 5,000 tons of chemical weapons, lethal biological weapons and a large cache of remaining missiles.

It also seems likely the Korean War, which never truly ended, could start anew, killing millions with a cost easily in the trillions of dollars and reconstruction costing trillions more — for much of which America likely would be on the hook.

We could, of course, just go back to a policy of “maximum pressure,” to contain North Korea through economic and diplomatic isolation. Unfortunately, such a policy might be impossible

now — a historic summit between Trump and Kim and a handshake that surely legitimized the North to many around the world might spell the end of any sort of containment-style strategy.

Why, for example, would China — which takes in 90 percent or more of Kim's exports, and is truly in charge of any pressure strategy — continue to enforce sanctions if the president of United States is willing to sit down with Kim? And with America and China now locked into a tough trade war that only looks to be getting more heated, Beijing has no incentive to punish its ally. In fact, China would be foolish not to use North Korea as a bargaining chip in disputes with America over trade, Taiwan, or even the South China Sea.

This takes us full circle, to the idea that maybe it is time for America to wash its hands of this problem and move on, with the goal of ensuring that China can't overthrow the international order or turn most parts of Asia into its own personal fiefdom — a problem infinitely more challenging than an impoverished nation with an economy one-third the size of Rhode Island's.

In academia there already is support for such an idea. Those who subscribe to the “realist” school of international affairs now see a nuclear North Korea as a fact that can't be changed. Their argument is that a combination of arms control and deterrence — which clearly has been effective in the past — could work.

As former special assistant to President Ronald Reagan and prominent North Korea expert Doug Bandow of the CATO Institute points out, “It helps to think of North Korea as similar to, say, Pakistan, but without religion. A slightly unsettling place with nuclear weapons, but not one seen as particularly threatening.”

Even neoconservatives might be convinced to jump on the bandwagon. In January, Bloomberg View columnist Eli Lake argued that the Trump administration should just “give up” trying to get North Korea to surrender its nuclear weapons. Lake said, “America should never ‘accept’ North Korea as a nuclear weapon state. But it can end the pointless cycles of pressure and negotiation.”

Lake's argument is quite powerful — and, frankly, brave — but focuses on the bigger goal of trying to contain China's growing power in Asia. “To give up on prevention is to focus on treatment,” he explains. “America's diplomats and strategic planners can focus on improving our deterrence against North Korea,” almost the exact thinking and verbiage coming out of at least one prominent realist think tank here in Washington.

Doing so, according to Lake, would ensure American “diplomacy and military bandwidth can be devoted to countering China's militarization of the South China Sea and its broader economic and political strategy to turn our Pacific and east Asian allies into vassals of Beijing. In the future, Trump and his diplomats won't have to spend their meetings with Chinese counterparts pleading with them to get their client state to behave. That's China's problem now.”

Of course, the challenge with such a policy is that it can't be enacted in a bubble, and domestic politics might make such a move quite difficult. Trump would be challenged by Democrats who smell blood, eager to remind the American voter in an election year that Trump is reversing himself, going from calling Kim “Little Rocket Man” to someone he has a good relationship

with, and now accepting Kim's nuclear weapons. Conservative hawks such as Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) will predictably scream appeasement, arguing that a nuclear North Korea is unacceptable and should be tackled militarily.

But we would be wise to consider the benefits. If the administration were able, somehow, not to accept but to sidestep the nuclear challenge, a whole range of options would open up.

A peace treaty ending the Korean War could be signed. The DMZ, the most heavily armed border on Earth, could see a massive cut in troops and weapons. There could be an exchange of ambassadors between Washington and Pyongyang, even the potential of arms control agreements cutting back Kim's nuclear arsenal while allowing international inspectors into the North.

We also should remember our history. America dealt with a nuclear-armed Soviet Union, and now Russia as well as China that have nuclear weapons, both of which know that an atomic attack would mean the end of their nations. Would Trump dare make the same deal with Kim?

As the president loves to say, we'll see what happens.