

China Should Counsel North Korea and U.S. to Avoid Provocations and Negotiate Seriously

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The Biden administration found itself beset by foreign crises as soon as Joe Biden was inaugurated president. The issue of North Korea, already placed on a “policy review” back burner, looks to recede even further from the administration’s immediate concern.

But that would be dangerous. Indeed, it could risk peace on the Korean peninsula.

President Donald Trump, despite his many faults, deserves credit for having jump-started diplomacy with the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. Unfortunately, he did not have the follow-through necessary to reach an agreement with the North’s Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un. However, Trump created new possibilities for negotiation and cooperation.

Unfortunately, President Biden’s experience with the DPRK dates from the Obama administration, which adopted an ineffective policy called “strategic patience.” In essence, President Barack Obama acted like Pyongyang was insignificant and focused on other issues. The result: The North proceeded to reprocess plutonium, develop nuclear weapons, and test missiles. When Trump entered the Oval Office, North Korea was developing intercontinental missiles capable of hitting the U.S.

Despite Obama’s experience, Biden might be tempted to follow his mentor, as dealing with the Kim regime has always proved difficult and often unproductive. Indeed, many hawkish analysts view Trump’s engagement with Kim as a bust. Yet the likelihood of the DPRK yielding its nuclear weapons, especially doing so before receiving any benefits, has always been minuscule. Still, simply pushing the issue aside would be tempting for any president, and especially one with so many domestic crises—the COVID-19 pandemic, economic damage, political division, and massive indebtedness, just to start.

Alas, North Korea is not a nation willing to be ignored. Kim greeted newly inaugurated President Trump with a missile test. With no indication of attention from Washington, the Supreme Leader will be sorely tempted to stage a repeat for Biden. A coup in Burma might draw U.S. attention. Even more so the flight of an ICBM capable of hitting America likely would attract interest.

Unfortunately, however, such an act would not generate positive recognition. Trump responded with a policy of “maximum pressure,” dramatically ramping up sanctions on the North. If Biden reacted any less vigorously, he would be attacked by Republicans for being weak and an appeaser. Far more likely would be the opposite response, a harsh action designed to demonstrate resolve. Perhaps new sanctions, if there is anything left to cover, or reinforcements sent to South

Korea, or even threats of military strikes on nuclear and/or missile facilities. Raising tensions in this way would be especially dangerous since the DPRK's military is essentially: use it or lose it. If Pyongyang came to believe an American attack was imminent, it might be tempted to launch its own preemptive strike.

The People's Republic of China is the one state in contact with both the North and America. Admittedly, Beijing-Washington relations are currently frayed. Nevertheless, the transition in Washington creates an opportunity for emotions to calm, leaving the PRC well-positioned to play international mediator. However, U.S. policymakers understandably view China and their interactions with North Korea with suspicion. Indeed, some American commentators believe that Beijing controls its small neighbor, despite ample contrary evidence.

However, the PRC could speak more broadly to both Washington and Pyongyang, warning them of the danger in taking the wrong path. First, China should discourage the North from engaging in serious provocations, most notably nuclear or missile testing. Beijing, which has long opposed actions that raise tensions and destabilize the peninsula and region, has given this advice before.

In the past Kim has dismissed China's concerns, but he now has greater reason to pay attention to Beijing's arguments. PRC-DPRK relations only improved starting with the first Xi Jinping-Kim Jong-un summit in early 2018, and Beijing's support is even more important today, after the North sealed itself off from the rest of the world in an attempt to avoid COVID-19. In effect, North Korea sanctioned itself. Chinese food and energy aid are more important than ever. Kim could ill afford to risk a shut-off by ignoring Beijing's wishes.

Moreover, Xi could use the controversy as an excuse to call Biden, reinforcing their recent conversation. Even if the administration cannot expedite its Korea policy review, Xi should suggest that Biden or one of his top officials, either Secretary of State Antony Blinken or National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan, communicate with Pyongyang.

A statement or speech would suffice. The administration should make clear its commitment to engage the North, without committing to any particular outcome. Most important would be emphasizing that DPRK patience would receive greater attention and reward than provocation. In contrast, the latter would both trigger retaliation and rouse Republican opposition. Neither would be in Pyongyang's interest.

Finally, China should urge both the U.S. and North Korea to look beyond nuclear weapons and adopt policies which would expand transparency and communication, such as opening liaison offices. The PRC might emphasize to the Biden administration the tragedy that Beijing and Washington were not talking when the Korean War erupted and especially when China decided to enter the conflict. The ability to communicate directly, which did so much to defuse the Cuban Missile Crisis, was unfortunately absent in 1950.

The Biden administration will look a lot more like its long line of predecessors than did the Trump administration. However, it would be a mistake for the former to blindly follow the Korea policy of the Obama or previous administrations.

“Strategic patience” turned out to be strategic folly. The North responded to American inattention with rapid missile and nuclear development. Surely that is not a legacy that President Biden wishes to leave to his successor.

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