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North Korea: Trump's First Foreign Policy Test in Asia

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Trump's new defense chief James Mattis hit the ground running, so to speak, and top on his agenda was meeting with his counterparts in South Korea and Japan. Just two weeks after being sworn in as Secretary of Defense, he was in South Korea, the initial stop on his first itinerary abroad, presumably to reassure the U.S.' historical ally of the Pentagon's continued commitment to the alliance between the two countries.

What was unusual about this trip is that it broke with the now decade-long tradition of U.S. defense secretaries making the Middle East the destination of their first overseas trips. It also departs from the unspoken custom of U.S. dignitaries stopping in Tokyo before Seoul. What, then, prompted Mattis to rush to Seoul immediately after taking office?

Trump's inauguration speech contained virtually no mention of his foreign policy goals and signaled a distinctly inward-looking and isolationist vision. "For many decades, we've enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry; subsidized the armies of other countries, while allowing for the very sad depletion of our military. We've defended other nations' borders while refusing to defend our own," he said. "From this day forward, it's going to be only America first, America first."

A scan of Trump's cabinet leads one to believe U.S.' foreign policy focus, if anything, will continue to be intervention in the Middle East and upping the ante in the so-called "war on terror." Mattis commanded the Marines in the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and is an outspoken critic of the U.S.' nuclear deal with Iran. Trump's first pick for national security advisor Mike Flynn was well known for his controversial views on Islam before he eventually resigned over his alleged Russian connections. And Trump expects, however inanely, his son-in-law Jared Kushner to "produce peace in the Middle East."

As far as Asia is concerned, U.S.' alliance with Japan, not South Korea, will likely be the anchor of Trump's security policy in the region. Japan's prime minister Shinzo Abe was the first foreign leader to meet Trump after his November election win and met him again this past weekend over a round of golf at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida.

So why, again, did Mattis cross the Pacific in such a hurry to visit Seoul?

What Keeps them Up at Night

The clue may be found in the recent remarks of Robert Brown, the commander of U.S. Army Pacific, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. "The thing that keeps me up at

night, the thing that worries me the most is North Korea," he said on January 25 in a keynote address on the forecast for the Asian region in 2017.

State Secretary Rex Tillerson echoed this sentiment in a recent phone conversation with his South Korean counterpart Yun Byung-se. Referring to the North Korean nuclear program as an "immediate threat," Tillerson reportedly said the issue will be foremost in his face-to-face talks with Yun in the near future.

From the outset of his administration, even before he's had a chance to get his house in order, Trump is faced with a North Korea that has, for the past eight years while the previous U.S. administration refused to engage, been quietly sharpening its sword. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un warned in his new year address that his country is close to test-launching an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of delivering a nuclear warhead to the continental United States. And just one day before Trump took office, North Korea placed two missiles presumed to be ICBMs on mobile launchers in plain view of U.S. spy satellites.

Spooked, the Pentagon deployed its Sea-Based X-Band Radar out of Pearl Harbor 2,000 miles northwest of Hawaii to watch for a possible North Korean launch. This might also explain why, within minutes of Trump's inauguration, the White House posted a policy position on its website announcing its intention to develop a "state of the art" missile defense system to protect against attacks from North Korea and Iran.

An incoming government official not given to following the U.S.-North Korean conflict may ask oneself, "How the heck did we get here?"

Byung-jin versus Strategic Patience

U.S.-North Korean relations during the previous Obama administration may be characterized as a contest between "byung-jin" versus strategic patience— strategic patience being the U.S.' policy of waiting and preparing for the eventual collapse of the North Korean regime, and "byung-jin" being North Korea's strategy of making parallel progress in economic development and its nuclear deterrence capability.

The United States has always maintained a certain level of tension on the Korean peninsula and painted North Korea as a belligerent pariah to justify U.S.' strategic presence on the Asian continent, which it considers vital to its economic and geopolitical interests. This is all the more important now in view of China's growing influence in the region. But a belligerent with nuclear weapons is another matter altogether. For the past twenty years, the United States has tried to stall North Korea's nuclear development while constantly threatening to bring about the regime's collapse through crippling sanctions and military exercises that rehearse provocative war plans including the decapitation of the North Korean leadership.

In defiance, Kim Jong-un has pursued a simultaneous "guns and butter" approach— eluding the sanctions through a combination of multi-year economic plans, a series of work speed-up campaigns that mobilize the entire population, and a boost in tourism and special economic zones to attract foreign currency; and devoting the country's top scientists and engineers to developing an effective nuclear deterrent. The Hyundai Research Institute, a South Korean think tank notes that despite the sanctions, North Korea's per capital income has risen steadily since the 2000's.

At the end of Obama's presidency, the consensus in Washington was that strategic patience had failed. North Korea had not collapsed, and to the contrary, experts warned that the country will soon have an ICBM that can strike the continental United States. Siegfried Hecker, an American nuclear scientist at Stanford University, who visited North Koreas's plutonium processing plant at Yongbyon in November 2010, estimates that North Korea might develop the capacity to strike the West Coast of the United States with a nuclear warhead within five years. Hecker wrote, the North is now probably able "to put nuclear weapons on target anywhere in South Korea and Japan and even on some U.S. assets in the Pacific."

Richard N. Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations, concurs— "It is only a matter of time before North Korea increases its nuclear arsenal (now estimated at 8-12 devices) and figures out how to miniaturize its weapons for delivery by missiles of increasing range and accuracy."

Byungjin, apparently, has triumphed over strategic patience.

Limited Options for Trump

Trump's former advisor Michael Flynn seemed to reject the option of continuing the status quo, which would be to stick one's head in the sand and simply ignore North Korea. According to a South Korean official who met with him back in November, Flynn had said North Korea's nuclear program would be a high priority under the new administration.

What, then, are the options before Trump?

Some advocate military action to take out North Korea's nuclear program. But they would be well-advised to remember that former President Bill Clinton considered this option in the early 1990's and ultimately nixed the idea based on a Pentagon assessment that even limited action could escalate into a full-scale war and lead to the death of one million people. And that estimate was made *before* North Korea possessed nuclear weapons.

Global intelligence firm Stratfor outlined the challenges of a military action against North Korea in a five-part analytical series entitled "Removing the North Korean Nuclear Threat" published last year—

> First, we simply do not have a comprehensive or precise picture of the North Korean nuclear program, especially when it comes to the number of weapons and delivery vehicles — we do not know for sure where they are located or how well they are protected. Second, we have no way of knowing just how good the U.S. intelligence picture really is when it comes to the North Korean nuclear program. Predicting the likelihood of a U.S. strike is difficult to do when the decision to carry out an attack would depend heavily on the degree of confidence the United States places in its intelligence.
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> The destruction of North Korea's nuclear infrastructure is hardly enough to remove the deterrent. Therefore, though the United States can be reasonably certain of its ability to destroy the nuclear infrastructure in a single strike, it would require an extremely accurate intelligence picture — far beyond what is likely — for Washington to be reasonably certain of having hit and destroyed all available weapons and delivery vehicles. The longer the North Korean program evolves, the more this becomes a reality. Realistically, absent the use

> of nuclear weapons or the invasion and occupation of North Korea, the United States and its allies are already at a point where they cannot guarantee the complete removal of the threat of a North Korean nuclear attack.

The United States has 28,500 troops, some with families, stationed in South Korea, and North Korea is capable of striking key U.S. assets in the region, including Guam and Okinawa. Even limited surgical action could escalate to a full-scale regional confrontation with potential Chinese involvement. The United States, on the other hand, is still too bogged down in the Middle East to shift its attention effectively to another region as volatile as Northeast Asia. War, for anyone of rational mind, is clearly not an option.

The Myth of China's Leverage over North Korea

Others advocate pressuring China to denuclearize North Korea. But how will this administration persuade China to solve a crisis that is essentially a problem between the United States and North Korea while Trump threatens a trade war with China? Also, China has made clear that if the United States wants its cooperation on North Korea, it should first reverse its controversial decision on the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) anti-missile system in South Korea.

(As a quick aside- the Pentagon wants to place missile interceptors and the THAAD radar in South Korea to counter North Korea's missile threat and spy on China's missile activity. This has been most ardently opposed by the residents of Seongju South Korea, where the THAAD system will be based, and China. Despite the political crisis that has engulfed South Korea, where the current administration has no legitimacy in the eyes of the public, the United States has been aggressively pushing forward the THAAD deployment decision and has said that it plans to complete the deployment by this summer.) All indications suggest the Trump administration will continue the same policy on the THAAD deployment, and that will make it difficult to get Chinese cooperation on North Korea.

Moreover, the strategy of pressuring China to denuclearize North Korea is based on the assumption that China has the kind of leverage, presumably economic, that can force North Korea to abandon its only deterrence capability. But it's unclear that this is true.

In a report for the Wilson Center, James Person warns against outsourcing North Korea policy to China and says China's leverage over North Korea "is a double-edged sword." Cutting off North Korea's economic lifeline would invite instability on China's borders and precipitate a refugee crisis in Northeast China, "the last thing Bejing wants," he writes. (Actually, what China may want even less is the prospect of a unified Korean peninsula led by a pro-U.S. South Korean government as its neighbor should North Korea collapse.) Moreover, Person argues, China's leverage is limited, and North Korea's relationship with China has historically been fraught with tension and mistrust. "Economic leverage does not enable the Chinese leadership to impose policy directives upon North Korea at will—precisely what North Korea most resisted throughout the Cold War," he writes.

North Korea, furthermore, may not be as economically reliant on China as the United States believes. As it rebuilt its nearly-collapsed economy, North Korea placed strong emphasis on the principle of self-reliance. It devoted scientific and technological research to ensuring that their basic economic building blocks, such as steel, fertilizer and textile, are made with indigenous raw materials and technical know-how. "So that we don't have to rely on exports and can be free from the volatile fluctuations of the global market," explained the manager

of a fully-automated sock factory in Pyongyang on the author's trip to North Korea in 2011.

The Path to Peace

The only remaining and sensible option is to start talks, but what type of talks? The sole concern for the United States is to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons. North Korea's concern is to remove the threats to its sovereignty, i.e. the sanctions that prevent its full economic potential; the military exercises that constantly threaten war and simulate the collapse of its regime; the perpetual state of war since 1953 when an armistice put a temporary halt to the Korean War and the parties failed to produce a peace treaty; and the presence of 28,500 U.S. troops stationed south of the de-militarized zone.

The United States, if it were to negotiate, will most likely try to repeat what it has done in the past— impose a moratorium on North Korea's nuclear weapons program and draw out the talks as long as possible while dangling the possibility of incentives, such as economic assistance and the removal of a limited layer of sanctions. But it may quickly realize that the negotiating table is no longer what it used to be.

For one, economic incentives are not what North Korea is primarily after. In a little-noticed statement issued in July 2016, North Korea laid out the terms for denuclearization and presented five conditions, all of which were very clearly not about economic assistance but had to do with removing the threats (either perceived or real) to its sovereignty posed by U.S. nuclear weapons. North Korea is no longer the energy-starved nation arduously toiling to survive as it was during the former Clinton and Bush administrations. And it now possesses a range of options in its nuclear arsenal. It successfully flight-tested a long-range submarine-launched ballistic missile last year and claims it successfully detonated a hydrogen bomb. Western experts dispute North Korea's claims about its nuclear capability, but what matters at the negotiating table is that North Korea now feels confident enough in its deterrence capability to reject anything less than a fundamental resolution to its longstanding conflict with the United States.

The sheer arrogance of our policy makers in Washington may blind them, but they may gradually wake up to what former National Intelligence Director James Clapper concluded last year– that persuading North Korea to renounce nuclear weapons, "their ticket to survival," is "probably a lost cause." Unless the United States declares an end to the Korean War, signs a peace treaty and finally withdraws its troops from the peninsula, that is.

Upcoming War Games

Every year from late February through March, the U.S. and South Korean militaries conduct combined exercises called Key Resolve Foal Eagle, massive war games involving tens of thousands of U.S. troops, including from Guam, Okinawa and the U.S. mainland, and the deployment of strategic weapons. And every year, North Korea stages a demonstration of protest before the war games begin. 2017 is no exception.

North Korea fired an intermediate-range ballistic missile into the East Sea last Sunday, and more missile tests may follow. In an exclusive interview with NBC on January 25, Choe Kang-il, deputy director general for North American affairs at North Korea's foreign ministry, reiterated Kim Jong-un's new year message that their country is ready to test-fire an ICBM "at any time, at any place." Referring to the upcoming Key Resolve Foal Eagle exercises, he

added, “As long as the U.S. conducts these joint military exercises we will increase our nuclear deterrent forces and our preemptive strike forces.”

If North Korea follows through on its notice of an ICBM test, then how Trump responds will be an early indicator of how U.S.-North Korean relations might play out during his administration. If he responds with tough talk and more sanctions, we’re in for escalation of tensions that could include North Korea test-launching an SLBM, followed by successive tests of an atom bomb and a hydrogen bomb, i.e. the whole kitten caboodle in its nuclear arsenal. In other words, the situation will likely get much bleaker before turning around for the better. If, on the other hand, Trump drastically scales down or halts the war games in preparation for talks, it would indicate that someone with a clear head regarding the Korea crisis has the ear of his administration and there’s a chance for improved relations.

What’s been reported thus far about this year’s Key Resolve Foal Eagle is confusing, to say the least. According to a Yonhap News report filed on February 8, Seoul and Washington are reportedly “in talks to deploy U.S. strategic assets,” including the Nimitz-class super-carrier USS Carl Vinson Strike Group, B-52 and B-1B bombers, to the Korean Peninsula during the exercises. The allies will, according to the same article, conduct the exercises as though the THAAD missile defense system, planned for deployment later this year, is already in operation and rehearse a preemptive strike plan called “4D,” which stands for detect, disrupt, destroy and defend. This reflects the recent comments of General Vincent Brooks, commander of U.S. Forces in Korea (USFK), who advocates the integration of offensive capabilities in the so-called U.S. missile “defense” system. “Defense is not enough. If we’re not also able to kill the archers, then we’ll never be able to catch enough arrows,” he said at an air and missile defense forum hosted by the Association of the U.S. Army on February 7. “So we have to have an offensive capability also integrated into our air and missile defense system.”

On the other hand, an earlier Yonhap report on January 30 curiously stated that South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) “will lead the upcoming exercises with the U.S. staff playing a supporting role” and suggested that the United States will play a markedly diminished role this year. It quoted an unnamed South Korean defense ministry official as saying, “During the upcoming Key Resolve exercise, Seoul’s JCS will be responsible for exercise planning and control, operation of opposing forces, and after-drill meetings.” The article also announced that this year’s exercise command center will be in an underground bunker of South Korea’s Capital Defense Command, not the usual bunker of the South Korea-U.S. Combined Forces Command.

The two reports together don’t stack up. How would an exercise led by the South Korean JCS incorporate the THAAD system, which is solely operated by the United States? The confused reports about the upcoming Key Resolve Foal Eagle exercise may reflect general disorientation within the Trump administration and/or discord between the Pentagon and the South Korean Defense Ministry on how to approach North Korea. That, most likely, is the reason why newly-appointed defense chief Mattis scurried to Seoul within weeks of assuming office. And while there, he presumably surveyed the political mess that the current Park Geun-hye administration and the South Korean ruling party are in and could not possibly have come away with a clear or satisfying assessment of the near future for the U.S-South Korean alliance.

Mattis and his boss would do well to learn from the failures of their predecessors. North Korea is not collapsing, and its nuclear threat is real. The lives of 28,500 U.S. troops, not to

mention the 75 million Koreans on the Korean peninsula, are at stake. The only sensible path is dialogue towards a fundamental solution— signing a peace treaty to bring closure to the Korean War and finally withdrawing U.S. troops from the Korean peninsula in exchange for a halt in North Korean nuclear weapons development and a commitment to non-proliferation. Suspending the upcoming war games and abandoning U.S.' preemptive nuclear strike prerogative should be the first stop on that path.

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