

U.S.-North Korean Relations in a Time of Change

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The months ahead may reveal the direction that U.S.-North Korean relations will take under the Trump administration. After eight years of 'strategic patience' and the Rebalance to Asia, those relations now stand at their lowest point in decades. Many foreign policy elites are expressing frustration over Washington's failure to impose its will on the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), more commonly known as North Korea. There are increasing calls for a change in policy, but what kind of change do they have in mind? We may be at the point of a major transition.

President Trump has given mixed signals on North Korea, ranging from saying he is open to dialogue, to insisting that North Korea cannot be allowed to possess nuclear weapons and that he could solve the dispute with a single call to China. It is fair to say that any change in policy direction is possible, although deeply entrenched interests can be counted on to resist any positive movement.

Other than his frequently expressed hard line on China, Trump has not otherwise demonstrated much interest in Asian-Pacific affairs. That may mean an increased likelihood that he will defer to his advisors, and conventional wisdom may prevail. The more influence Trump's advisors have on North Korea policy, the more dangerous the prospects.

CIA Director Mike Pompeo believes that Iran and North Korea cooperate in what he calls "an evil partnership." [1] He has also called for the mobilization of economic and military powers against the DPRK. [2]

Establishment think tanks have churned out a number of policy papers, filled with recommendations for the new administration. Their advice is likely to fall on receptive ears among Trump's advisors. How much influence they will have on Trump's decision-making is another question, but he is hearing a single message from those around him and from the Washington establishment.

A common theme running through these think tank policy papers is the demand to punish China for its relations with the DPRK.

Here's an overview of what the major think tanks and U.S. military officers propose for how Trump should handle North Korea:

U.S.-Korea Institute

The most moderate set of proposals offered the Trump administration is the one produced by Joel Wit for the U.S.-Korea Institute, in that it at least calls for an initial stage that Wit terms "phased coercive diplomacy." Initial diplomatic contacts would "explore whether agreements that serve U.S. interests are possible while at the same time" the U.S. would lay

the groundwork for “increasing pressure” on North Korea. A modest scaling back of the annual U.S. war games could be offered as an incentive to North Korea, along with negotiations on a peace treaty, as long as the U.S. feels it can gain more from North Korean concessions.

At the same time, Wit calls for the new administration to “communicate toughness” and implement a “long-term deterrence campaign.” This would include the rotation of B-1 and B-52 bombers into South Korea on a regular basis, along with stationing nuclear weapons-armed submarines off the Korean coast.

While negotiations are underway, Wit wants the U.S. to direct a propaganda war against the DPRK, by increasing radio broadcasts and infiltrating portable storage devices containing information designed to destabilize the government. What he does not say is that such hostile measures can only have the effect of derailing diplomacy.

If North Korea proves less than compliant to U.S. demands, or if it prepares to test an ICBM, then Wit advises Washington to impose a total “energy and non-food embargo” on North Korea. Wit argues that China must accede to U.S. demands in the UN Security Council for what amounts to economic warfare on North Korea, or else the United States should impose “crippling sanctions” on the DPRK and secondary sanctions on China. By attacking the Chinese economy in this manner, Wit says this would send a message “that the United States would be prepared to face a serious crisis with China over North Korean behavior.” The arrogance is stunning. If China does not agree to American demands in the United Nations, then it is to be punished through U.S. sanctions. [3]

This is what passes as the “moderate” approach among Washington’s foreign policy establishment.

American Enterprise Institute

Wit is not alone in his eagerness to punish China. Nicholas Eberstadt of the American Enterprise Institute believes that “the next round of penalties will probably have to be ones which have some sort of collateral fallout for China...Sanctions are fine, more sanctions are better,” he says. “Increasing the cost for China, I think, is the way to go.” [4]

Eberstadt argues that U.S. North Korea policy should “consist mainly, though not entirely, of military measures.” “It is time for Beijing to pay a penalty for all its support” for North Korea, he declares. “We can begin by exacting it in diplomatic venues all around the world.” [5] Displaying the presumption all too typical of Washington elites, he has nothing to say about how China might react to his hostile policy prescriptions. The assumption is that China should just take the punishment without complaint. That will not happen.

U.S. Navy Commander Skip Vincenzo

U.S. Navy Commander ‘Skip’ Vincenzo prepared a set of recommendations that proved so popular that it was jointly published by four think tanks. Vincenzo is looking ahead and planning for how the United States and South Korea could attack the DPRK without suffering great losses. He urges the Trump administration to conduct an information war to undermine North Korea from within. The aim would be “convincing regime elites that their best options” in a conflict “would be to support ROK-U.S. alliance efforts.” He adds that “easily understood themes such as ‘stay in your garrisons and you will get paid’ should

target the military rank and file.” North Korean military commanders should be told they would be “financially rewarded” for avoiding combat. “The objective is to get them to act independently when the time comes with the expectation that they will benefit later.” [6]

Interesting phrase, ‘when the time comes.’ Vincenzo anticipates that military intervention in North Korea is only a matter of time. He clearly envisions a scenario like the U.S. invasion of Iraq, when many Iraqi units melted away rather than fight. The fantasy that the U.S. could repeat the Iraqi experience in the DPRK is based on a misjudgment of the Korean national character. Nor does it take into account that what followed the invasion of Iraq could hardly be construed as a peaceful development.

Brookings Institute

The Brookings Institute, despite its centrist reputation, encourages Trump to take actions that are savage and reckless. “The new president,” the Institute says, “should adopt an approach that focuses on North Korea’s main goal: regime survival...The United States and its allies and partners should make North Korea choose between nuclear weapons and survival.”

The Brookings Institute calls for all-out economic warfare on the North Korean people. “A more robust approach,” it advises, “should go after “the financial lifeblood of the North Korean regime in new ways: starving the regime of foreign currency, cutting Pyongyang off from the international financial and trading system, squeezing its trading networks, interdicting its commerce, and using covert and overt means to take advantage of the regime’s many vulnerabilities. A strong foundation of military measures must underline this approach.”

In a major understatement, the Institute admits that “such an approach carries risks.” Indeed it does, and it is the Korean people who would bear that cost, while Washington’s elites would face none of the consequences of their actions. What the Brookings Institute is calling for is the economic strangulation of North Korea, which would bring about the collapse of people’s livelihoods and mass starvation.

Like other think tanks, the Brookings Institute advocates targeting China, calling for the imposition of secondary sanctions on “Chinese firms, banks, and state-owned enterprises” that do business with North Korea. [7] The aim would be to cut North Korea off from all trade with China.

Former USFK Commander Walter Sharp

Walter Sharp, a former commander of U.S. Forces Korea, says that the United States should launch a preemptive strike if North Korea prepares to launch a satellite or test a ballistic missile. “The missile should be destroyed,” he declares. It is easy to imagine the violent response by the United States, were a foreign nation to attack one of its missiles on the launch pad. It is delusional to expect that North Korea not only wouldn’t respond in some manner but would have no right to do so. But Sharp advocates “overwhelming force” if North Korea retaliates, because, as he puts it, Kim Jong-un should know “that there is a lot more coming his way, something he will fear.” [8] If this sounds like a prescription for war, that is because it is.

It is a measure of how decades of militarized foreign policy have degraded public discourse

in this country to such an extent that these lunatic notions are not only taken seriously, but advocates are sought out for advice and treated with respect.

Council on Foreign Relations

It is not surprising that Walter Sharp was invited to join the task force that produced a set of recommendations on behalf of the Council on Foreign Relations. The task force calls for the early stages of negotiations to focus on a nuclear freeze, limitations on North Korean conventional forces and missile development, and inspection of nuclear facilities. Obligations on North Korea would be front-loaded, with absolutely nothing offered in return. The promise of a peace treaty and gradual normalization of relations would be back-loaded, contingent on full disarmament, an improvement on human rights, and allowing U.S. and South Korean media to saturate the DPRK. Certainly, that last demand would be a non-starter, as it is impossible to imagine that North Korea would agree to allow its media space to be dominated by hostile foreign entities.

Such a one-sided approach has no chance of achieving a diplomatic settlement. As a solution, the Council recommends that the United States continually escalate sanctions during the negotiating process.

The Council on Foreign Relations calls for the U.S., South Korea, and Japan to build up the capability to intercept North Korean missile launches, “whether they are declared to be ballistic missile tests or civil space launch vehicles.” If negotiations falter, it advises the three allies to shoot down North Korean missiles as they are soon as they are launched. That would be an act of war. And how does the Council on Foreign Relations imagine North Korea would respond to having a satellite launch shot down? It does not say.

Further development of North Korea’s nuclear program, the Council suggests, would require “more assertive diplomatic and military steps, including some that directly threaten the regime’s nuclear and missile programs and, therefore, the regime itself.”

“The United States should support enhanced information operations” against North Korea, the Council adds, to undermine the government and “strengthen emerging market forces.” Predictably enough, it advocates “severe economic pressure” on North Korea, as well as encouraging private companies to bring legal suits against nations and companies that do business with North Korea. [9]

It is not diplomacy that the Council on Foreign Relations seeks, but regime change, and its policy paper is filled with the language of the bully.

Rand Corporation

Bruce Bennett is a senior defense analyst at the Rand Corporation. He warns that North Korea’s desire for a peace treaty is a ruse. “In reality,” he says, “by insisting on a peace treaty, North Korea is probably not seeking peace, but war.” He goes on to claim that a peace treaty might lead to the withdrawal of U.S. forces, after which the North could be counted on to invade South Korea. Calls for a peace treaty, he adds, “should be regarded as nothing but a deceitful scam that could lead to the devastation of South Korea, a U.S. ally.” [10] This is an argument that other analysts also make, and is clearly delusional. But it serves as a good illustration of how in the blinkered mindset of Washington’s policy analysts, unsupported assertion takes the place of any sense of reality.

The Center for a New American Security has planted deep roots in the U.S. establishment. Ashton Carter, secretary of defense in the Obama administration, expressed the level of respect and influence that CNAS holds in Washington. “For almost a decade now,” Carter said, “CNAS has been an engine for the ideas and talent that have shaped American foreign policy and defense policy.” Carter added that “in meeting after meeting, on issue after issue,” he worked with CNAS members. [11] His comments reveal that this is an organization that has constant access to the halls of power.

The Center for a New American Security has produced a set of policy documents intended to influence the Trump administration. Not surprisingly, it favors the Rebalance to Asia that was initiated by President Obama, and advocates a further expansion of U.S. military forces in Asia. [12] It also wants to see greater involvement by NATO in the Asia-Pacific in support of the U.S. military. [13]

Patrick Cronin is senior director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at CNAS, and as such, he wields considerable influence on U.S. policy. Cronin asserts that “Trump will want to enact harsh sanctions and undertake a serious crackdown” on North Korean financial operations, but these steps should be of secondary importance. Trump should “double down” on the U.S. military buildup in the region, he says, and alliance strategy should send the message to Kim Jong-un that nuclear weapons would threaten his survival. There it is again: the proposal to threaten North Korea’s survival if it does not abandon its nuclear program.

Regardless of diplomatic progress, Cronin believes the U.S. and its allies should conduct an information war against North Korea “at both elite and grassroots’ levels.” [14]

China is not to be ignored, and Cronin feels Trump will need to integrate “tougher diplomacy” with economic sanctions against China. [15]

It remains to be seen to what extent Trump will heed such advice. But the entire foreign policy establishment and mainstream media are united in staunch opposition to any genuinely diplomatic resolution of the dispute. Trump has expressed a healthy skepticism concerning CIA intelligence briefings. Whether that skepticism will be extended to the advice coming from Washington think tanks is an open question.

If the aim of these proposals is to bring about denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula, then they are recipes for failure. But if the intent is to impose economic hardship on the North Korean people, while capitalizing on the nuclear issue as a pretext to dominate the region, then these think tanks know what they are doing. As always, human considerations mean nothing when it comes to serving corporate and imperial interests, and if they fully have their way, it will be no surprise if they succeed in bringing to the Korean Peninsula the same chaos and destruction that they gave to the Middle East. One can only hope that more reasonable voices will prevail during policy formulation.

Political Change in South Korea: A Potential Game-changer

What none of the policy papers address is the role that South Korea has to play. It is simply assumed that the status quo will continue, and South Korea will go along with any action the U.S. chooses to take, no matter how harsh or dangerous. In the mind of the Washington

establishment, this is a master-servant relationship and nothing more.

That Koreans, north and south, may have their own goals and interests is not considered. The truly astonishing mass protests against South Korean President Park Geun-hye, which led to her impeachment, have opened up a world of possibilities. Whatever happens in the months ahead, it won't be business as usual. U.S. policymakers are in a panic at the prospect of a more progressive and independent-minded government taking power after the next election in South Korea, and this is what lies behind plans to rush the deployment of a THAAD battery ahead of schedule. But in a sense, it may already be too late. Park Geun-hye, and by implication her policies, have been thoroughly discredited. It may well be that the harsher the measures Washington wants to impose on the DPRK, the less it can count on cooperation from South Korea. And it could be this that prevents the United States from recklessly plunging the Korean Peninsula into chaos or even war.

Let us imagine a more progressive government taking power in South Korea, engaging in dialogue with its neighbor to the north and signing agreements on economic cooperation. Were the U.S. so inclined, it could work together with such a government in South Korea to reduce tensions and develop economic ties with the DPRK. Rail and gas links could cross North Korea, connecting the south with China and Russia, and provide an economic boost to the entire region. North and South Korea could shift resources from military to civilian needs and start to dismantle national security state structures. The nuclear issue would cease to matter. All of those things could be done, but it would take a change in mentality in Washington and a willingness to defy the entire establishment.

Alas, it is far more likely that tensions will continue to be ratcheted up. Longstanding confrontation with Russia and China has been the keynote of U.S. policy, leading to the encirclement of those nations by a ring of military bases and anti-ballistic missile systems. The Rebalance to Asia aims to reinforce military power around China. North Korea, in this context, serves as a convenient justification for the U.S. military and economic domination of the Asia-Pacific.

North Korea's Nuclear Deterrent is Not a Threat to Global Peace

Why is North Korea's nuclear weapons program regarded as an unacceptable threat, whereas those of other nations are not? Why do we not see the United States imposing sanctions on Pakistan for its nuclear program, or conducting war games in the Indian Ocean, practicing the invasion of India? Why do we not hear calls for regime change in Israel over its nuclear program?

Instead, Pakistan is the fifth largest recipient of U.S. aid, slated to receive \$742 million this year. India receives one-tenth of that amount, and the United States recently signed an agreement with it on military cooperation. [16] As for Israel, the United States has pledged to provide it with \$38 billion in military aid over the next ten years. [17]

What is it about its nuclear weapons program that causes North Korea to be sanctioned and threatened, whereas the U.S. warmly embraces the others? Pakistan, India, and Israel have nuclear programs that are far more advanced than North Korea's, with sizeable arsenals and well-tested ballistic missiles. The other major difference is that North Korea is the only one of the four nations facing an existential threat from the United States, and therefore has the greatest need of a nuclear deterrent.

There is no threat of North Korea attacking the United States. It has yet to test a re-entry vehicle, and so cannot be said to have the means of delivering a nuclear weapon. Furthermore, the nation will never have more than a small arsenal relative to the size of that owned by the U.S., so its nuclear weapons can only play a deterrent role.

The “threat” that North Korea’s nuclear program presents is twofold. Once North Korea succeeds in completing development of its program, the United States will lose any realistic possibility of attacking it. Whether the U.S. would choose to exercise that capability or not, it wants to retain that option.

The other aspect of the “threat” is that if the DPRK succeeds in establishing an effective nuclear weapons program, other small nations facing U.S. hostility may feel emboldened to develop nuclear programs, thereby reducing the ability of the U.S. to impose its will on others.

It’s difficult to see why North Korea would ever give up its nuclear program. For one thing, according to U.S. State Department estimates, North Korea is spending anywhere from 15 to 24 percent of its GDP on the military. [18] This is unsustainable for an economy in recovery, and nuclear weapons are cheap in comparison to the expense of conventional armed forces. The DPRK is placing great emphasis on economic development, and a nuclear weapons program allows it to shift more resources to the civilian economy. [19]

Recent history has also shown that a small nation relying on conventional military forces has no chance of defending itself against attack by the United States. For a nation like North Korea, nuclear weapons present the only reliable means of defense.

Peace Treaty is Not a Guarantee of Peace

North Korea attaches great importance to the signing of a peace treaty. After more than six decades since the Korean War, a peace treaty is long overdue and a worthy goal. But if the DPRK imagines that a peace treaty would provide a measure of security, I think it is mistaken. The U.S. was officially at peace with each of the nations it attacked or undermined.

What kind of guarantees could the United States possibly give North Korea to ensure its security in exchange for disarmament? An agreement could be signed, and promises made, and mean nothing. Libya, it should be recalled, signed a nuclear disarmament agreement with one U.S. administration, only to be bombed by the next. No verbal or written promise could provide any measure of security.

The one-sided record of U.S. negotiators is hardly an encouragement for North Korea to disarm either.

For example, shortly after the United States signed the September 2005 Joint Agreement with North Korea, U.S. negotiator Christopher Hill sought to reassure Congress that the United States was not about to begin to normalize relations, even though that is precisely what the agreement obligated it to do.

Normalization of relations, he explained to Congress, would be “subject to resolution of our longstanding concerns. By this, I meant that as a necessary part of the process leading to normalization, we must discuss important issues, including human rights, biological and chemical weapons, ballistic missile programs, proliferation of conventional weapons,

terrorism, and other illicit activities.” North Korea “would have to commit to international standards across the board, and then prove its intentions.” Christopher Hill’s point was clear. Even if North Korea were to denuclearize fully, relations would still not move toward normalization. North Korea would only be faced with a host of additional demands. [20]

Indeed, far from beginning to normalize relations, within days of the signing of the September 2005 agreement, the Treasury Department designated Macao-based Banco Delta Asia as a “primary money-laundering concern,” despite a lack of any evidence to back that claim. U.S. financial firms were ordered to sever relations with the bank, which led to a wave of withdrawals by panicked customers, and the bank’s closure. The aim of the Treasury Department was to shut off one of the key institutions North Korea used to conduct regular international trade. That action killed the agreement.

The Libyan Lesson

The Libyan nuclear agreement provides the model that Washington expects North Korea to follow. That agreement compelled Libya to dismantle its nuclear program as a precondition for receiving any rewards, and it was only after that process was complete that many of the sanctions on Libya were lifted. It took another two years to remove Libya from the list of sponsors of terrorism and restore diplomatic relations.

Upon closer examination, these ‘rewards’ look more like a reduction in punishment. Can it be said that a reduction in sanctions is a reward? If someone is beating you, and then promises to cut back on the number of beatings, is he rewarding you?

It did not seem so to the Libyans, who often complained that U.S. officials had not rewarded them for their compliance. [21]

What the U.S. did have to offer Libya, though, were more demands. Early on, Undersecretary of State John Bolton told Libyan officials that they had to halt military cooperation with Iran in order to complete the denuclearization agreement.[22] And on at least one occasion, a U.S. official pressured Libya to cut off military trade with North Korea, Iran, and Syria. [23]

American officials demanded that Libya recognize the unilateral independence of Kosovo, a position which Libya had consistently opposed. [24] This was followed by a U.S. diplomatic note to Libya, ordering it to vote against the Serbian government’s resolution at the United Nations, which asked for a ruling by the International Court of Justice on Kosovo independence. [25]

Under the circumstances, Libya preferred to absent itself from the vote, rather than join the United States and three other nations in opposing the measure.

The U.S. did succeed, however, in obtaining Libya’s vote for UN sanctions against Iran. [26] In response to U.S. directives, Libya repeatedly advised North Korea to follow its example and denuclearize. Under U.S. pressure, Libya also launched a privatization program and opened opportunities for U.S. businesses.

U.S. officials often urged the North Koreans to take note of the Libyan deal and learn from its example. These days, that example looks rather different, given the bombing of Libya by U.S. warplanes and missiles. Colonel Muammar Qaddafi was rewarded for his cooperation with the United States by being beaten, impaled on a bayonet, and shot several times.

There is a lesson here, all right, and the North Koreans have taken due note of it.

The Real Threat to Peace

It is time to challenge the standard Western narrative.

Under international space law, every nation has the right to launch a satellite into orbit, yet North Korea alone is singled out for condemnation and denied that right. The United States, with over one thousand nuclear tests, [27] reacts with outrage to North Korea's five.

To quote political analyst Tim Beal, "The construction of North Korea as an international pariah is an expression of American power rather than, as is usually claimed, a result of the infringement of international law. In fact, the discriminatory charges against North Korea are themselves a violation of the norms of international law and the equal sovereignty of states." [28]

Since 1953, North Korea has never been at war.

During that same period, to list only a sampling of interventions, the U.S. overthrew the government of Guatemala, sent a proxy army to invade Cuba, and bombed and invaded Vietnam, at the cost of two million lives. It bombed Cambodia and Laos, sent troops into the Dominican Republic, backed a military coup in Indonesia, in which half a million people were killed, organized a military coup in Chile, backed Islamic extremists in their efforts to topple a secular government in Afghanistan. The U.S. invaded Grenada, mined harbors and armed anti-government forces in Nicaragua, armed right-wing guerrillas in Angola and Mozambique, armed and trained Croatian forces and supplied air cover as they expelled 200,000 people from their homes in Krajina, bombed half of Bosnia, armed and trained the Kosovo Liberation Army, attacked Yugoslavia, invaded Iraq, backed the overthrow of governments in Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Georgia, Honduras, and many other nations, bombed Libya, and armed and trained jihadists in Syria.

And yet, we are told that it is North Korea that is the threat to international peace.

2017 could be a pivotal year for the Korean Peninsula. An energized population is bringing change to South Korea. We should join them and demand change here in the United States, as well. It is time to resist continued calls for a reckless and militarized foreign policy.

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