

North Korea: Is a “Grand Bargain” Possible? by Ralph A. Cossa

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North Korea’s nuclear policy seems based on a simple and clear, but potentially fatally flawed, premise: its all-out effort to develop and possess the ability to put a nuclear warhead on an intercontinental missile and launch it at the United States will ensure the security of the nation and regime. Nothing could be further from the truth! The closer the DPRK gets to achieving this capability, the greater becomes the cost (to the US, ROK, Japan, and even to China) of allowing it to do this.

For decades, US and ROK military forces have been deterred from attacking North Korea, not because of any embryonic nuclear weapons capability but because of the destruction the North’s conventionally-armed rockets, missiles, and artillery could rain on Seoul. Even though the final outcome has never been in doubt, the costs associated with pursuing a military solution outweighed the costs of tolerating the Kim regime’s existence. But this calculus is changing. The costs of continuing to do nothing and thus allowing Pyongyang to fully develop the capability of putting a nuclear weapon on Seoul, Tokyo, or the US will soon outweigh the costs associated with the use of military force. At that point, the use of force becomes a viable, if not inevitable, option. DPRK threats to launch a preemptive nuclear attack against the US or ROK provide greater justification for such action.

Such an option still incurs great risk, of course. That’s why it is likely that a policy of regime change by other than military means may be tried first. North Korea has been accusing Washington of pursuing regime change for years but this has not been the case. Previous efforts have sought to change regime behavior, not the regime itself. This may soon change. An all-out effort to destabilize the Kim regime is likely coming, and I would not be surprised if China not only does not object but goes along with the idea. Beijing would prefer a North Korean buffer zone and dreads instability on its border. But assurances from Washington and Seoul that they are open to the continuation of the North Korean state, but under the leadership of someone more accommodating to China and the rest of the world, would alleviate Beijing’s primary concern. It’s already pretty clear that Xi Jinping is not Kim Jong Un’s biggest fan.

Don’t get me wrong. Pursuing regime change, regardless of how it’s done, is a terrible option. No one desires or prefers to do this. But if Pyongyang continues on its current path, military planners may view it as the only viable choice.

There is a way out of this darkening situation. Pyongyang has made no secret of its desire for a peace treaty with

Washington. What it has thus far failed to recognize, however, is that the road to Washington runs through Seoul. There will soon be a new leader in the South. While a more liberal leader is likely to be more willing to do business with the North, Pyongyang should not get its hopes up. Regardless of who wins, he will likely not be as accommodating as previous progressive leaders, unless Kim Jong Un is willing to meet him half way.

North Korea’s founder (and the current leader’s grandfather) Kim Il Sung once proposed a Koryo Federation comprised of two independent Korean states that respected each other’s choice of political systems. Once the people of the South have democratically selected their new leader, Kim Jong Un should send him a letter, addressed to the President of the Republic of Korea (rather than the usual “leader of south Korea” salutation) and propose a meeting in a neutral location (I suggest Ulaanbaatar) to discuss “peaceful coexistence” as a first step toward a harmonious, denuclearized Korean Peninsula.

Then, send a note to President Xi asking him to reconvene the long moribund Six-Party Talks on the basis of the September 19, 2005 Joint Agreement and its “action-for-action” agenda and signal to President Trump that the DPRK is open to a “grand bargain” along the lines previously suggested by the Pacific Forum’s founder, RADM (USN, ret) Lloyd “Joe” Vasey (100 years young and still going strong), which calls for a mini-Marshall Plan and security guarantees for the DPRK in return for step-by-step verifiable denuclearization.

Or, Pyongyang can continue on the present, potentially self-destructive path, leaving the Trump administration with only two options: accepting North Korea as a de facto nuclear weapons state capable of holding Seoul, Tokyo, Honolulu, and eventually Washington at risk, or taking whatever steps are necessary to prevent the North from reaching this goal. All options are on the table; the choice, at least initially, is Pyongyang’s.

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