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President Trump and the crisis on the Korean Peninsula
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Failure to resolve the North Korean problem could be disastrous for all parties, but deciding the best response to North Korean WMD threats is far from easy. Prevailing assumptions include: North Korea is never going to be accepted as a nuclear power; North Korea will retaliate against any military strike, potentially leading to all-out war; the US will continue to follow rules-based principles to promote regional peace and stability; and South Korea needs to identify policies distinct from the strong stance taken against the North Korean regime by former President Park Geun-hye.

North Korea has continued to ratchet up tensions, and managing the situation through diplomatic or military means grows ever more difficult. Some uncompromising rhetoric has come from the Trump administration, declaring that all options remain on the table, including the possibility of preemptive strike operations and the redeployment of tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. US officials also insist that installing the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system on South Korean soil is a *fait accompli*, and have sponsored three United Nations resolutions condemning North Korea's tests.

Absent a diplomatic consensus on dealing with North Korean mischief, hawkish policies predominate: South Korea is being reassured by strengthening bilateral cooperation on deterrence, through annual security and military meetings and multiple military drills. Unfortunately, as North Korea's nuclear capabilities have steadily grown, diplomatic efforts to mitigate the crisis have lapsed and military options have loomed larger. Indeed, such is the fear of military escalation between the US and North Korea that all-out war could erupt suddenly, without any preliminary indications or warnings.

As yet, however, war is neither imminent nor inevitable. North Korea lacks the sophisticated command and control systems and the global intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance sensors that only military satellites can provide: its nuclear threats are likely to remain rhetorical for some time. Apparently understanding this, the Trump administration has, in practical terms, largely copied the approach of the previous administration.

US and Chinese perspectives

President Trump seems not to regard the North Korean issue as a foreign policy priority, and to some extent this is understandable. The White House national security team has its hands full, and Washington considers it unlikely that North Korea would trigger an all-out war against the US and its allies, South Korea and Japan. With Russia continuing to destabilize the Middle East and Europe, the Korean Peninsula seems to be a less urgent problem, since the status quo between two Koreas has long been maintained, despite frequent tensions.

The Trump administration's policy on North Korea appears focused on pressuring China to do more, as expressed by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson during his first visit to China on March 18-19 for talks with his counterpart, Wang Yi, and with President Xi Jinping. Also, the US House of Representatives recently passed a bipartisan resolution calling on China to exercise its influence to pressure Pyongyang to give up its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Undoubtedly China, through which goods enter and leave North Korea, has considerable influence with its neighbor. But so far China has not been persuaded to take the tough stance that the US would like. Although Chinese leaders are not keen on Kim Jong Un's regime, nor its nuclear weapons, they have been more concerned with increasing Chinese military prowess to resist US influence. In reality, Beijing has limited leverage over Pyongyang, and under the cover of humanitarian motives, it continues to import coal and provide oil and food to Kim's regime. Any sudden collapse would present an immediate problem, from refugees, and a long-term one, with the potential loss of the strategic buffer zone between China and the US.

So China is unlikely to shift its position to please the US, but instead will continue to use North Korea to unsettle the US. South Korea was disturbed because, during his recent visit, Tillerson did not signal any specific policies, merely arguing that China should do more to constrain North Korea.

South Korea's predicament

Any South Korean administration must be concerned about the ramifications of Trump's 'America-First' policy. Insofar as these have been articulated, US allies and partners face a choice of accepting increased burden-sharing or being abandoned by the US: neither option is appealing to South Koreans. For the time being, the South Korean administration has retained the security and foreign policies of former President Park Geun-hye, including the decision to deploy THAAD, despite questions over its operational and tactical effectiveness, and also being unreasonably optimistic that China will bring North Korea to heel. Since the Six-Party Talks were discontinued in 2009, South Korea has had limited diplomatic involvement in resolving the problems caused by the North, and despite ongoing risk escalation on the Korean Peninsula, recent discussions between the US secretary of State and China's foreign minister have made clear that South Korea is playing piggy in the middle between the two great regional powers.

Moreover, South Korean opinion is polarized on national security issues, with entrenched positions adopted by the center-right and center-left. North Koreans continue to make significant progress toward an operational nuclear missile capacity: flight-testing long-range ballistic missiles, improving engines, and refining nuclear warheads. President Trump's advisors have ruled out restarting the Six-Party Talks, and have also declined the Chinese suggestion of talks between the US, China, and North Korea, so it seems that there is no prospect of a diplomatic solution.

Some constructive recommendations

Political will matters. The US and South Korea should make all possible efforts to encourage North Korea to abandon its pursuit of WMDs by providing convincing assurances of the benefits to the North Korean regime. The overwhelming concern of the North Korean leadership is regime survival, and the Obama administration conspicuously failed to persuade them that the US would allow this.

Set a new red line. Now that the policy of 'strategic patience' has been abandoned, the US and South Korea should make clear that unless North Korea makes some concessions toward abandoning its nuclear ambitions, the consequence will be the destruction of the Pyongyang regime, and that the US and South Korean military are ready and capable, as demonstrated by the combined bilateral military drills during March. For this, Seoul must try to separate the North Korean people from Kim's regime with Washington acting as a go-between. Some kinder and gentler diplomacy is needed, but this is not sufficient: the new administration should actively reach out to the North Korean people to undermine support for the Kim regime.

Move forward on several fronts simultaneously. Previous approaches have focused too narrowly on getting North Korea to abandon its nuclear and missile programs. lf North Korea - in cooperation with China - can demonstrate to the world that it can negotiate in good faith as a trustworthy partner, then all options can be on the table as part of a grand bargain: all relevant issues can be resolved in a concerted fashion, as happened in 2015 with the 'Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,' better known as the 'Iran Nuclear Deal'.

Begin by establishing a strategic dialogue with North Korea. Time is short: both the Trump administration and the next South Korean government need to recognize the urgency of the crisis. North Korea's neighbors are seriously concerned, and all stakeholders should send a special envoy as a strategic negotiator and a potential peacemaker: for this purpose, North Korea should be regarded as a significant adversary, not as an enemy.

South Korea should take a more prominent role. The Trump administration has taken a different line than its predecessor, but it has continued to treat South Korea as a bit player. With the current transitional South Korean administration this is perhaps pardonable, but the next South Korean government should reclaim the role of building a new relationship between the two Koreas and establishing the parameters of their interaction. Seoul will have to find a balance between the changing policy in Washington and Pyongyang's provocations.

Rather than focusing upon US security diplomacy to mitigate intractable North Korean WMD threats, the South Korean government should conduct its own North Korean policy, within the context of a less predictable Trump administration. The old plan, which allowed the Korean Peninsula to become a victim of old-fashioned 'power politics' and a very dangerous place, has failed. A new plan, and some radical new thinking, is needed. The policies of the Trump administration are critical, but the new South Korean government, which takes office in early May after the presidential election, should demonstrate greater strategic autonomy in determining its policy toward North Korea.

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