

Trump's 'without-China' approach on North Korea could work by Seong-Hyon Lee

*Seong-Hyon Lee, Ph.D. (seonghyon.lee@sejong.org) is a research fellow at the Sejong Institute, a think tank that specializes in national strategy and diplomacy in Seoul. This article previously appeared in *The Korea Times*.*

Donald Trump's warning that he would deal with North Korea "with or without China's help" could work. It reflects a judgment on China's role in this matter and hints at a "Plan B." It reduces China's prominent role in the international policy narrative on North Korea. Solving the North Korean conundrum with a US initiative would mean sustained US leadership and enlarging US interests in a region where the two major powers are increasingly in competition with each other.

Trump did not specify what unilateral options he would take. Therefore, it's more accurate to state "all options" are on the table (using Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's words), ranging from a military strike on North Korea to direct diplomatic talks. It is reasonable to expect that Trump will exhaust an inventory of non-kinetic options before he concludes that it's time to pursue a military option. Taking this sequential approach is also more likely to garner more international support for US actions.

The key logic here is to make China "irrelevant" in dealing with North Korea, and reducing the credit China has received or claimed as host of the six-party talks. More importantly, the US has a chance to unilaterally engage North Korea, if carefully and strategically oriented, and clinch a "grand bargain" with Pyongyang. The aim is not to prop up the regime, but to destroy it by implosion. It's an engagement strategy to topple the regime. Engagement is a Trojan horse in Trump's deal-making world.

The first step is for Pyongyang and Washington to reach a deal in which the North makes reasonable concessions on its nuclear programs, and the two sign a peace treaty. As a second step, the two countries will set up embassies in the other's capital. This is important and shouldn't be seen as "rewarding" the regime. The embassy is the Trojan horse.

One of the most persistent challenges for Washington in dealing with North Korea has been a lack of intelligence and figuring out its intentions. With an embassy, it can better gauge the state of affairs locally and establish communication channels with the North's leadership.

The third step is economic engagement. Instead of imposing sanctions on North Korea, Trump should do the opposite. The aim is twofold: to reduce the ubiquitous Chinese economic presence in North Korea and to habituate North Korean workers to Western capitalistic practices, including the

nine-to-five routine, improved sanitation, and respect for workers' rights.

Fourth, US businesses will enter North Korea, including some signature cultural products such as Hollywood and the entertainment industry. The obvious aim is to gradually spread "capitalist elements" within North Korea and expose its population to outside information.

This Trojan trick will be noticed by the North Korean authorities but the economic incentives are something they themselves desire. Similar strategies worked in the former East Germany. It worked (somewhat controversially) during the so-called "Sunshine Policy" period by progressive South Korean governments.

The North's authorities are well aware of the danger, a former senior government official who negotiated with Pyongyang told me. "But they agreed, because they judged that the incentives outweighed the risks." It tells us something about human nature. By modifying some mistakes and building on lessons learned from past experience, things can be worked out.

Finally, the key to "Operation Trojan Horse" is to run it as gradually as possible over a long period – for 30 or 40 years, if the German case is any indicator. The real aim is to change North Koreans' mindset and induce a peaceful implosion. If it is done peacefully, even China won't mind.

Tillerson said "all the efforts" of the past 20 years to deal with North Korea have failed. That isn't true. One trick has not been used. The US "going it alone" without China to deal with the North is not Bush-era unilateralism. But it can be seen as a viable alternative to everything else that has been tried and not worked.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.