

Trump's negotiation from strength by Patrick M. Cronin

Dr. Patrick M. Cronin (pcronin@cnas.org) is Senior Director of the Asia-Pacific Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) in Washington, D.C. This article originally appeared in Real Clear Defense and can be found [here](#).

The dominant media narrative on North Korea hypes fearmongering and plays to critics of the Trump administration. Ironically, President Donald Trump and his senior officials largely are following a bipartisan script used by previous administrations.

US policy toward the Korean Peninsula is remaining steady under pressure, focused on diplomacy backed by force and undisturbed by the summer's political and military drama. The Trump administration unwaveringly is standing resolutely beside President Moon Jae-in and the people of the Republic of Korea. In the face of Kim Jong Un's saber rattling and significant advances in nuclear and missile technology, the US administration is hewing to a well-established two-track, carrot-and-stick policy that blends hard and soft power and preserves stability while looking for meaningful ways to reduce tensions.

The hard, non-negotiable side of Trump administration policy strengthens US and ROK defenses to ensure that deterrence does not suddenly and catastrophically fail. It supplements this military readiness and capability with a variety of tools, including sanctions, designed to bring pressure on North Korea. Some sanctions are aimed at those entities doing business with North Korea and thereby abetting Kim's weapons of mass destruction programs. An ancillary benefit of secondary sanctions and shows of force are to ensure that China understands the consequences of its tepid pressure placed on Pyongyang.

The softer, pragmatic side of the current US approach searches for meaningful diplomatic engagement with North Korea. Quiet, back-channel diplomacy is the main vehicle for this activity, which necessarily receives less publicity than high-level meetings and statements designed to deter aggression and reassure allies.

To successfully deal with North Korea, there is no substitute for seamless coordination and close consultation between Seoul and Washington. Dispatching Gen. Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, to meet with officials in Seoul before heading to Beijing, are just among the most recent attempts to execute a policy of negotiation from strength.

Since the successful Moon-Trump get-acquainted summit in late June, a good cop-bad cop division of labor has formed organically. Headlines suggesting Washington should not use

force against North Korea without Seoul's consent, far from signaling an alliance breakdown, serves two purposes. It introduces uncertainty in the mind of Workers' Party Chairman Kim, and uncertainty about the intentions of outside powers, bolsters deterrence, and curbs North Korea's adventurism (such as testing missiles near Guam). Furthermore, the idea of alliance discord reinforces the division of labor, supporting Seoul as the lead actor hoping to find a peaceful path moving forward.

President Moon's call to attempt a peace deal with North Korea in 2020 reflects the actual pace of government action better than the daily flurry of frenetic headlines and breaking newscasts as tensions escalate and de-escalate with alarming alacrity. Beyond Kim's predilection for brinkmanship and the obvious point that war invites greater interest than peace, there are three reasons that stories about military conflict are overwhelming a diplomatic narrative for managing North Korea.

First, policymakers are grounded in the reality of their predecessors' bitter experience. Strategic patience is no longer the game. Even so, there is a stark recognition that previous officials have been seeking a sustainable peace for a long time and without much success. Presidents Trump and Moon need to be deliberate. They are right to neither capitulate at every North Korean taunt nor fall prey to Pyongyang's one-sided negotiating tactics. Deterrence will hold, and there is time to work on a diplomatic framework.

A second reason for the unhurried pace of diplomacy centers on the slower than expected rate at which the Trump administration has staffed its Asia team. There is a critical need to nominate and confirm an able and trusted ambassador to the ROK, as well as the regional policy assistant secretaries at the Defense and State Departments. Without a full complement of key policy officials, it is difficult to undertake new alliance initiatives that require careful preparation. The individuals who are set to be nominated for these three posts will, if confirmed, make outstanding officials. They should be in place early this autumn.

Third and finally, while the United States takes North Korea seriously as a threat to peace, it sees the long-term competition with an assertive China as a far more consequential challenge. Of course, both challenges—different in scale, type, and timeline—must be dealt with to preserve peace and prosperity.

In sum, the Trump administration is interested in peace, not war. President Trump resorts to phrases such as "fire and fury" to make sure that Chairman Kim understands he is dealing with a leader who is not afraid to use force if attacked. President Trump also knows that he cannot stop North Korea from trying to leverage fear. However, together, the US-ROK

alliance, supported by Japan others strong allies, can continue to deter any actual use of force.

Moving forward with regularly scheduled military exercises are part of the dual-track approach. Making small adjustments to the types of forces engaged or the duration of the exercise can send an encouraging signal to North Korea to refrain from further provocations and perhaps open a diplomatic path. But neither fear nor overreaction should guide the US and allied approaches.

Steady diplomacy backed by strength will win the day.

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

Click [here](#) to request a PacNet subscription.