



Why Pyongyang needs a victory over the US by Justin Fendos

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Some phrases have been repeated with alarming regularity in the US media in recent weeks: “surgical strike” and “preemptive attack.” They suggest that the US has an unchallenged upper hand, the ability to swat away the North Korean threat if Washington chooses to do so. Now that things have cooled a bit, it’s time to reevaluate the situation and examine several of the critical economic and cultural realities missed in this “fly-swatting” outlook.

The first of these realities is that North Korea has invested, over the last decade, everything it can in weapons development. North Korea’s GDP is around \$28 billion, about two thirds (\$15 billion less than) the quarterly revenue of Samsung Electronics. The average annual income of a North Korean is about \$1,340, 5 percent of an average South Korean’s, and 2.3 percent of an American’s. In short, North Koreans are really poor.

North Korea has little modern industry and few exports, most of them purchased by China. In fact, China accounts for about 92 percent of all North Korean trade. Despite being effectively bankrupt, North Korea has been spending about a third of its entire national income on weapons: just shy of \$9 billion a year. To emphasize: that’s a third of their *entire national income*, not just a third of the government or military budget. Starvation and destitution have been the result.

Pyongyang’s effort to weaponize has been very counterproductive economically, prompting successive rounds of sanctions and the 2016 closure of the Kaesong Complex, a highly lucrative industrial zone operated jointly by North and South Korea. This closure was a watershed moment, clearly conveying Pyongyang’s intentions to forgo economic dependence on Seoul and forge an independent path to self-sustenance, in this case, through weaponization.

Although this intention ran contrary to the desires of other nations, one must appreciate how North Korea went all-in on itself, betting on weapons to secure some form of independent future. From a psychological perspective, it is foolhardy to imagine Pyongyang willingly abandoning the hard-earned fruits of its sacrifice just because Washington did some saber-rattling or added economic pressure to an already bleak economic situation.

As my colleague, B.R. Myers, and others have noted, China is a key player in this equation. In addition to being Pyongyang’s largest trading partner, China supplies oil

imports for use as winter fuel. This is often referred to as the “nuclear” option (no pun intended) since a cessation would ruin North Korea. Thus arises the obvious question: why doesn’t China use this leverage to bring about disarmament? As usual, that’s because there is an alignment of the two countries’ goals.

Imagine Russia has military bases in Mexico. Guatemala, Mexico’s southern neighbor, expresses grievances, demanding Russia be evicted. To make its point, Guatemala conducts nuclear tests, takes pot shots across the border, and fires missiles into the ocean. Would the US, on Mexico’s northern border, be likely to convince Guatemala to back down? Of course not. The US would have a similar interest to remove Russian influence.

In much the same way, North Korea is demanding something also in China’s interest: a reduction of the US military presence on the Korean Peninsula. This mutual interest is evident in the conditions China has suggested in brokering a freeze on missile testing: a halt to US military exercises with South Korea.

Another reality often ignored is the fervor with which North Korea casts the US as the enemy. Not “an” enemy, but “the” enemy. Not only have North Korea and the US never signed a peace treaty ending hostilities to the Korean War, anti-US propaganda in North Korea is straightforward and harsh. Slogans pasted on street corners and recited by state media regularly refer to the US as “imperialists,” “bastards,” and other colorful epithets. South Korea, by comparison, is rarely mentioned directly as an enemy, but is cast more often as an unfortunate victim of US imperialist power, in need of liberation.

The vast majority of propaganda in North Korea is decidedly militant, with Kim Jong-un regularly appearing in posters and paintings leading soldiers, tanks, and missiles in glorious victory over US aggressors. Imagine Donald Trump’s image in Grand Central Station at the head of a wave of fighter jets bombing Pyongyang. That is the kind of imagery North Koreans are inundated with on a daily basis.

This overemphasized state of impending conflict produces another critical reality: the likely loss of life in a military confrontation. The words “surgical strike” and “preemptive attack” suggest US military action will be met with little resistance or backlash. Things could not be further from the truth. About 8,000 pieces of artillery and rockets are aimed at the South Korean capital of Seoul. Any attack by the US would indubitably be answered by utter devastation on Seoul. With about 300,000 rounds fired per hour on a city of 25 million, casualties would be catastrophic.

So what does North Korea want with its new weapons? Although there are likely several objectives, we have already

identified an important one: North Korea needs some triumph, however insignificant, over the US. China has already suggested a path to this token victory: a cessation of military drills with South Korea.

Such a cessation, even temporary, would allow Pyongyang's propaganda machine to claim a serious blow dealt to its mortal enemy, allowing previous sacrifices, economic and otherwise, to be justified and glorified, stabilizing and legitimizing Kim Jong-un's status as a capable leader. Unfortunately, the current US administration seems incapable or unwilling to make a concession of this type to pave the way to some form of dialogue.

This inflexibility reflects a significant cultural difference. Whereas Asians are more likely to be willing to make token concessions to let their adversaries save face, the modern Western mindset is more intent on avoiding shows of weakness, concerned that concessions will encourage future misbehavior. Both attitudes are correct in their respective cultural and historical contexts so it remains to be seen what kind of compromise can be brokered, if any.

It also remains to be seen whether continued US firmness will prompt desperation, provoking even more aggressive actions, like a missile strike toward Guam. As the ruler of a bankrupt nation who repeatedly promised that new weapons would pave the way to a better future and global respectability, it can't be comfortable for Kim Jong-un to face a reality in which no one is responding to the fruits of his country's sacrifice.

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