



EMPOWERING KOREA

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For the first time since the Korean War, reduced tensions on the Korean Peninsula have presented a real opportunity to resolve North Korean issues by focusing on converging security concerns increasingly shared by the Republic of Korea (ROK), Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), and the United States (US) about the rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC). That new reality portends a security realignment far different from that of today and invites a game-changing reassessment of US security roles and responsibilities in the region.

The United States should seek to rebalance the changing power equation in Northeast Asia by:

- 1) *Offering to empower both North and South Korea to counterbalance the rising PRC superpower and;*
- 2) *Serving as a multi-dimensional security guarantor for regional allies and partners, potentially including the DPRK.*

Our conclusions rest on two assumptions. First, US leadership is crucial to counterbalancing the PRC's growing power projection capabilities. Second, the US should not limit itself to a defensive posture along the "First Island Chain" but should seek to counterbalance growing PRC power from the Korean Peninsula. To achieve that objective, Washington should propose a new security and economic arrangement that empowers both North and South

Korea to assist in balancing China. To prevent PRC hegemony over the Korean Peninsula, the US strategy must build a constructive relationship with the DPRK; similar to the one Washington has with the ROK. Normalized US-DPRK relations offer the best path for Washington to positively shape the future Northeast Asian security environment, and the only realistic way to convince Kim Jong Un to agree to denuclearize.

Shared long-term security threat

The return of a hegemonic China has created the opportunity for Washington, Seoul, and Pyongyang to realign security interests to their mutual long-term benefit. Kim Jong Un, if he is to give up his nuclear weapons, must first be convinced that denuclearization will not equate to a loss of DPRK national security. North Korea's tirades against the United States led many to conclude that Pyongyang intends to use its rudimentary nuclear weapons against US targets. However, the DPRK's paramount motivation is its own security and survival. Deterring the United States is part of that effort, but it is even more logical to conclude that it fears growing leverage from a rising hegemonic China.

A crucial decision for the Korean people

What security alignment will strengthen, rather than weaken, the Korean future? That choice lies not in *whether* the Koreans partner with a larger power for their security (because going it alone is not a viable option for them) but rather in *which* country to choose.

All Koreans should be deeply concerned by the apparent re-emergence of Beijing's historical suzerainty over the Korean Peninsula. They increasingly understand that the PRC seeks to integrate with both Koreas until it can make them subservient to its interests. Already, the PRC is stripping the DPRK of its natural resources, and exports far more to North Korea than it imports from it. The PRC has displaced the United States as the ROK's largest trading partner, increasing Beijing's influence over both halves of the Korean Peninsula.

For both Koreas, partnership with the US is the better counterbalancing choice by far. The ROK has done so for seven decades and, by most any measure, it chose

well. In contrast, the DPRK's relationship with the PRC has made it neither secure nor prosperous.

US power balancing role

Convincing Kim Jong Un to accept Washington's offer to do for the North what it has done for the South, will be difficult, but not impossible. Throughout history, former adversaries have chosen to become partners in response to changing balance of power dynamics. As Lord Palmerston pointed out: *Nations have no permanent friends or allies; they only have permanent interests.*

Balance of power theory dictates that destabilizing security threats must be contained, counterbalanced, or removed. The United States does not intend to remove China, and cannot contain it. It must therefore balance it. US strategy toward the DPRK aims to *disempower* the North through military deterrence, diplomatic isolation, and economic sanctions. That has not worked. Moreover, disempowerment of the northern half of the Korean Peninsula is not in the long-term interests of Washington or Seoul, and would open the door to still greater involvement by Beijing on the peninsula.

A better approach would be to protect US vital interests in the region by counterbalancing PRC hegemony. In part, by *empowering* the Korean people. The US would work with its ROK ally to pull the North Koreans closer toward their orbit. To convince the DPRK its guarantee of security is real, the US would need to offer its extended nuclear deterrence capabilities over the entire Korean Peninsula, and to work with both the North and South to empower the Korean nation as-a-whole, whether it remains divided under two governments or not. Offering KJU a better security alternative is the only viable way to end the nuclear standoff with the DPRK.

US assistance in the economic development of the DPRK would not preclude ties between the PRC and the two Koreas, but would open new opportunities for US, European, and Asian investors. As US-DPRK relations normalize, we can conceive of the Korean People's Army re-purposing itself to defend Korean autonomy from Chinese encroachment. That progression could even come to include the provision

of US and ROK military assistance to the DPRK. Renewed progress toward the shared Korean goal of reunification would become more likely as North-South relations improve.

A proven successful strategy

Normalizing the Korean Peninsula demands comprehensive engagement with the DPRK. Given the extreme differences between the two sides, however, it will be important to establish achievable steps toward longer-term goals. A cap (or freeze) on DPRK nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs is an acceptable interim end-state, allowing the United States and the ROK to work with the DPRK to address security and economic concerns.

By contrast, punitive actions, such as targeted financial sanctions, have failed to change the nature of the regime. Economic and financial incentives would work better, but are not currently part of Washington's strategy because they are seen as "rewarding" the DPRK. Economic development does not reward; rather, it would evolve North Korea.

Engaging the present DPRK government is a distasteful proposition to many; yet, the naysayers are wrong to oppose it. It is a proven strategy for improving relations with America's adversaries. Examples include Nixon's outreach to Communist China (1970s); Reagan-Gorbachev détente (1980s); Clinton's normalization of relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (1990s); and Obama's efforts to do the same with Myanmar and Cuba (2010s). In each case, the US administration dramatically improved contentious relations after switching to engagement strategies. The results have been far from perfect but they have been substantial. Engagement with the DPRK is now US policy and could lead to similar breakthroughs. To succeed, however, the US, ROK, and DPRK must embrace geostrategic realignment.

Conclusion

Abraham Lincoln might have provided the solution to the North Korea problem when he asked: *Do I not destroy my enemies when I make friends of them?* The security challenge on the Korean Peninsula is one of the most complex and difficult foreign policy issues

the United States has faced, but we need look no further than Honest Abe to find a solution that makes the most sense.

Editor's Note: Pacific Forum realizes that the limited length of this article prevents a full explanation of the grand strategy it advocates. The article is part of a larger *Empowering Korea* project that explores, in depth, a comprehensive reassessment of US strategy. This article introduces and outlines the crucial elements of that strategy; i.e, its ends, ways & means. The authors welcome both comments and challenging point-counterpoint exchanges."

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