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## *Diplomacy For Dealing With the Problem of North Korea*



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“There would be little for diplomats to do if the world consisted of partners, enjoying political intimacy and responding to common appeals.”

– Walter Lippmann, 1947.

The Biden administration inherited significant bilateral problems with three nuclear weapons states (Russia, China, and North Korea) as well as Iran, which has mastered the nuclear fuel cycle. The tensions with Russia and China are greater now than they were

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two years ago, and thus far Biden's national security team has no apparent plans for ameliorating tensions with Iran and North Korea. Biden's team seems to have thrown up its hands in despair regarding Iran and North Korea, having forgotten what diplomacy is all about. Let's start with the North Korean problem, and address the other issues in future columns.

The Biden administration believes that isolating North Korea and using sanctions to apply pressure is the best way to deal with Pyongyang and its inscrutable leader, Kim Jong-un. When President Joe Biden was asked if he had a message for North Korea, he abruptly replied "Hello. Period." There is no recognition that increased U.S. military maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific only led to increased North Korean testing and Chinese military exercises. (In Europe, the United States has never acknowledged that the expansion of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the deployment of Western forces in East Europe have contributed to the current crisis with Russia.)

As a result, relations between North and South Korea are worse than they have been in the recent past. Pyongyang's torrid pace of weapons tests since the inauguration of President Biden continues unabated, and there is the possibility of Pyongyang's seventh nuclear test, the first since 2017. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's answer is to call for more sanctions; Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin favors increasing the pace of joint military exercises with South Korea. The most recent one included the participation of our newest aircraft carrier, the nuclear-powered supercarrier USS Ronald Reagan.

The last thirty years of conducting diplomatic isolation and economic pressure on North Korea have failed. There is no easy solution to the North Korean problem, but robust deterrence and close defense cooperation with our Indo-Pacific allies has gotten nowhere. U.S. efforts to pursue closer relations with Taiwan has only led to the worsening of tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Meanwhile, the CIA has been predicting regularly for the past thirty years that North Korea would soon deploy missiles that would reach the continental United States.

Aggressive military exercises with our allies and U.S. intelligence collection have created apprehension in North Korea regarding U.S. intentions, particularly in view of U.S. efforts to conduct regime change. Pyongyang's missile testing is designed in part to demonstrate that it has countervailing military capabilities against the U.S. policy of deterrence. In this way, Kim Jung-un demonstrates the legitimacy of his regime to his own people and counters U.S. discussion of possible regime change in North Korea. He is also

demonstrating a capacity for nuclear blackmail against his neighbors and their U.S. benefactor.

The missing component in any effort to ameliorate the North Korean problem is a comprehensive program to reduce tensions with North Korea, which should be a major task for the Department of State. The only real success in the recent past has been the Clinton administration's Agreed Framework with North Korea in the 1990s, which led to reduced North Korea testing as well as South Korea's energetic engagement policy with the North. The Clinton policy included increased congressional support, and greater consultation with China, which had the ancillary benefit of improved relations with Beijing.

The Agreed Framework had initial success, including the temporary shutdown of the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, the end to construction of two larger nuclear power plants, and the sealing of spent fuel that could have been reprocessed to create plutonium for a nuclear weapons. The United States was obligated in return to construct two light water reactors in North Korea and to provide the annual supply of heavy fuel oil needed to compensate for lost energy production. Unfortunately, soon after the agreement was signed, the Republican party took control of the Congress and then, in 2002, President George W. Bush obtusely declared that North Korea was a part of the "axis of evil," which led to worsening U.S. relations with North Korea as well as Iran and Iraq.

Recent U.S. administrations have never agreed to offer genuine concessions to test Pyongyang's interest in limiting its missile program. Washington has some leverage in this regard because of Pyongyang's interest in a peace treaty to end the Korean War that began 70 years ago. The United States could also provide assurances that it would not return nuclear weapons to South Korea. Pyongyang would require serious limits on U.S.-South Korean military exercises, which play a significant role in increasing tensions in the region. In the past, China has suggested a trade-off between limits on North Korean missile testing and greater restraint in U.S.-South Korean joint military exercises.

The discussion of reduced sanctions and tariffs with North Korea and China, respectively, could lead to improved U.S. relations with both Pyongyang and Beijing. China and Russia would respond favorably to any serious U.S. effort to improve relations with North Korea that reduced North Korean missile testing. In view of the overwhelming global strength of the United States, the Biden administration is positioned to pursue conciliatory gestures in the Indo-Pacific.

The lack of serious policy discussion in Washington on conciliatory steps is consistent with the past twenty years of reduced interest in arms control and disarmament. President Clinton bowed to right-wing pressure and abolished the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency; President Bush abrogated the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the cornerstone of strategic deterrence; Presidents Bush and Obama invested in the nonsensical deployment of a national missile defense at home as well as a regional missile defense in Eastern Europe; and President Trump abolished the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty, the only treaty to abolish an entire class of offensive weapons. The Biden administration, marked by a retired four-star general as secretary of defense and a lackluster secretary of state, has virtually abandoned arms control as well as diplomacy, which is essential for countries that don't share political intimacy and common purposes.

As a result, the myth of American exceptionalism continues to dominate American strategic thinking. American defense spending is at record levels as Washington futilely practices dual containment against both Russia and China. Military leaders and their congressional allies are calling for an expanded national missile defense on the East Coast. And the preoccupation with Ukraine has led to reduced U.S. interest in pursuing diplomatic alternatives to the current round of militarization. We are in the early stages of Cold War 2.0.

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