

PacNet #57 - The August crisis: Militarization versus civilization on the Korean Peninsula

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A war of words has erupted between the United States and North Korea, dubbed the “August Crisis” by the local press, following the testing of two intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) that North Korea claims can reach the continental US, and a display of US military might. North Korea routinely makes extreme rhetorical threats, but this time US President Donald Trump responded in kind, evoking the horrific prospect of a nuclear exchange.

South Korean attitudes

The new South Korean president, Moon Jae-in, has offered talks with the North on humanitarian issues and mitigating the military standoff, but most South Koreans do not expect the rhetoric to lead to war, and there is no sign of any imminent attack on Seoul. South Koreans do not believe sanctions can force North Korea to abandon its nuclear program, though they’re useful as part of a broader approach to try and bring all sides back to the negotiating table. Domestic economic issues dominate South Korean concerns; after a few years of sluggish growth, Korean stock markets have recently hit a six-year high.

The nuclear militarization of the Korean Peninsula?

This crisis is playing out as a series of complementary maneuvers by the two leaders, with each being a useful punching bag for the other: Kim wants to secure his support base, which remains uncertain, given his continuing reluctance to adopt economic reforms modeled on China, and Trump needs North Korea to divert domestic criticism of his failure to fulfill his election pledges, at least that, in my view, is the Asian consensus. From a South Korean perspective, it does not look as if either leader is really interested in fighting a war, but the escalating rhetoric implies the nuclear militarization of the Korean Peninsula. Nevertheless, South Koreans remain calm despite Trump’s threats of “fire and fury” and “locked and loaded,” and despite North Korea’s threats to “launch a pre-emptive nuclear strike” and respond with “thousand-fold nuclear retaliation.”

China’s role

South Koreans worry that if the US cannot find a way to deal with the North Korean problem, then its influence in East Asia will dwindle, and China’s will grow. It is clear the US is no longer strongly committed to promoting rule of law and is less interested in standing as a bastion of modernity, stability, and civilization. China has done just enough to divert blame and pose as a responsible international actor. Thus China, and also Russia, supported the latest set of international sanctions imposed on North Korea by United Nations Security Council, and yet North Korean trade with both countries has grown significantly this year. China aspires to be the primary guarantor of East Asian security, but this will be a hollow ambition unless the “August Crisis” is resolved peacefully.

Time for an alternative approach

President Trump has made unrealistic boasts about preventing the nuclear militarization of the Korean Peninsula, and his unprecedented emphasis on US military power makes it more difficult to formulate other ways to improve North Korean relations with the US and South Korea. Presumably, his administration is hoping military pressure will soften up the North Koreans so that diplomatic means can be deployed more effectively. So far, however, Trump’s approach seems more chaotic than coherent. In any case, it relies upon China and Russia to rigorously enforce sanctions, which seems unlikely. So it would be naïve to expect resolution of the current crisis in the near term.

Unfortunately, the Korean Peninsula suffers from a serious lack of opportunities for communication, especially since the demise of the Six-Party Talks. There is an urgent need to find other channels to encourage a better understanding among all interested parties. While the A-team is pursuing the geostrategic approach, we also need a B-team that can work on simpler and easier issues than denuclearization. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has recently stated that the US is not the enemy of North Korea, saying “We do not seek a regime change, ... the collapse of the regime, ... an accelerated reunification of the peninsula, [or] an excuse to send our military north of the 38th parallel.” Tillerson made a similar declaration in the *Wall Street Journal* in an article co-authored with Defense Secretary James Mattis. In this light, a B-team, involving both the US and South Korea should take up individual and separable problems in relations with North Korea. By demonstrating more flexibility, this effort would try to frame North Korea in different terms: not as a vicious nuclear-armed enemy, but as a civilized partner working towards a peaceable post-crisis Korean Peninsula.

What would be on the B-team agenda? On June 30, 2017, a joint statement by the US and the Republic of Korea advocated helping to stimulate North Korea’s home and backyard markets (*Jangmadang*); industrial investment to expand energy supply; and developing people-to-people ties by sporting interactions, student, professional, cultural and scientific exchanges, and by tourism and family visits. The B-team would not work directly toward resolution of the crisis, but to remind all why we should strive to avoid military conflict.

The B-team should include business groups, civic organizations, investment consultants, energy experts, and others who can contribute to creating a better life for the North Korean people and to building trust among the elite, reducing their motivation to pursue unnecessary nuclear militarization of the Korean Peninsula. *Ultimately*, the North Korean leadership depends upon the support of its people, and the B-team can build a groundswell of popular opinion that accepts the necessity of capping or abandoning Kim’s nuclear program. We have no reason to suppose Kim is not a rational actor. Yes, he focuses on the interests of the elite, rather than those of the North Korean people, but the B-team can bridge the gap between their interests.

Only civilization can resolve the North Korean problem

Essentially, this paper is proposing that we should try to embed North Korea into the wider community of the Korean Peninsula by recognizing our common civilizational heritage and our common humanity. President Moon, in a nationally televised speech marking National Liberation Day, denounced Trump’s bellicose threats: “Only South Korea can decide on a military operation on the Korean Peninsula, and no-one should be allowed to decide on a military option against North Korea without South Korean agreement.” He also received reassurance, on Aug. 14, from Gen. Dunford, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, who stated that any military options against North Korea would only be considered as a last resort.

Some commentators in Washington and Seoul argue for the reintroduction of US tactical nuclear weapons to South Korea. This would surely lead to a nuclear arms race on the Korean Peninsula and around the region, including Japan and Taiwan. But rather than making a difficult situation worse, why not avert the outbreak of war by promoting the outbreak of civilization instead? All parties would benefit, and we would be setting an example for the world to emulate – both China and the US should take this opportunity to secure the moral high ground. There are geostrategic options available for the A-team to discuss. For example, China has proposed that North Korea suspend its nuclear and missile programs and the US tone down its regular military exercises. Meanwhile, however, the B-team should be working indirectly to promote civilization on the Korean Peninsula. Only by pursuing both approaches in parallel is there any realistic prospect of curbing the nuclear militarization of the Korean Peninsula.

Americans are now becoming anxious about the situation on the Korean Peninsula (though only 36 percent can locate it on a map!). South Koreans, despite being much more familiar with the issues and much more exposed to the threat of North Korean missiles, are much calmer about the current crisis. They understand that North Koreans are people, just like us, who want and deserve a better life.

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