

“How Trump could ‘solve’ North Korea” by Eli Beckman

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With North Korea making rapid and alarming advancements in its nuclear weapons program, the era in which it can threaten the United States is dawning; recent tests have made clear that North Korea may already have the ability to deliver a nuclear warhead to Alaska, and will be able to reliably strike the mainland before the decade is out.

For years the US and its allies have struggled to find a response to North Korea’s provocations that doesn’t risk plunging the region into chaos, and China is in a similar bind: they dislike North Korea’s roguish behavior, but resist doing anything that could destabilize the regime, choosing to keep North Korea as a distasteful but manageable buffer between the American troops in South Korea and the Chinese border.

Traditional thinking holds that the US can’t live with North Korea and China can’t live without them, but traditional thinking has gotten us nowhere. It’s time to reimagine American engagement with China to find an alternative that’s acceptable to all parties.

There are two obvious ways this could go. The first and less radical option would be for China to deal North Korea a serious but nonlethal blow by cutting off most trade, including the oil supplies that keep the North’s economy running. Such a move would present Kim Jong Un with a domestic crisis, and while he no doubt sees the US forces stationed in South Korea as a serious threat, survival would dictate that he address the most pressing of the threats he faces: the one within his borders. It stands to reason that he might have less of an appetite for major external conflict when the situation at home demands all his attention and resources.

One could easily argue that with unrest at home, Kim Jong Un might see war as a way to distract and rally the nation – but with severe shortages of fuel and cash, war would not be a viable option. And while the embargo would likely result in hardship for North Korea’s already deprived people, Kim’s military buildup must be arrested; threat of an artillery barrage laying waste to Seoul or a nuclear missile incinerating Los Angeles is simply too great.

By forcing the regime to turn inwards and tend to its staggering economy, China could effectively turn the clock back on North Korea to a time when the recalcitrant state was still a threat, but more focused on consolidating itself than on antagonizing the rest of the world.

Doing so wouldn’t abolish North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, but it would force North Korea to weigh the expensive weapons against investing in its own stability in

a way that current sanctions don’t. If the crisis became dire enough to threaten the regime, it could even lead Kim Jong Un to accept economic aid in exchange for denuclearization.

In return for reducing the North Korean threat, China would see a commensurate cooling of the US posture in the region. The US would reduce its deployed forces to a level agreed upon by all parties, easing China’s concerns about encirclement and lending the region a modicum of stability – hardly ideal, but a far cry from today’s nuclear powder keg.

But that option is only available so long as Kim Jong Un keeps his wildest tendencies in check. Should he fail, there’s a second, more serious option.

China won’t risk destabilizing its buffer against the United States, but should the threat posed by North Korea become unacceptable, perhaps it could be convinced to let Kim go by an agreement that any post-Kim North Korea would remain a Chinese buffer free of US troops.

This scenario is set in motion when the United States and its allies determine that war is unavoidable, most likely as a result of an imminent or attempted attack. A lesser-of-two-evils calculation emerges: rather than allow the region to descend into a free for all, China, the US, and its allies would take steps – economic, military, or both – to induce the collapse of the regime, having already agreed on the basic contours of what will replace it.

War would ensue, and no matter how close the US came to neutralizing North Korea’s arsenal in a lightning strike, hundreds of thousands would lose their lives – many of them South Korean civilians.

But such a war would be far less deadly than one begun on North Korea’s terms, without prior coordination between the major combatants. In the Korean War, the US quickly came within inches of a total victory over North Korea, only for China to come charging in at the last minute and flood the peninsula with troops to maintain its buffer. This time, China would refrain because it would know it has a guaranteed seat at the table in building the post-Kim state.

Without China’s help, the Kim dynasty would quickly fall, and with the war over, the stabilization phase would begin.

One potential arrangement would be a US withdrawal from North Korea following the victory. China would be allowed to take the lead in providing relief to the North Korean people, gaining their favor and trust, while ushering a friendly government into power. Meanwhile, a monitored prohibition of Chinese military presence in the country would assure South Korea and the United States that the new regime is not a Chinese outpost. The outcome would be similar to

North Korea today, but with a somewhat more open society and no nuclear weapons.

Americans and South Koreans may be loath to sacrifice so much in neutralizing North Korea only to drop the country back into China's orbit, but they'd be foolish not to accept a buffer that isn't dangerous over one that is.

Another arrangement that might be more preferable to the Korean people is reunification. Despite their wide cultural differences, North and South Koreans maintain a common identity as Koreans, and many dream of reuniting families torn apart by the Korean War. In this scenario, South Korea would take the lead in reconciling the two Koreas into one, providing a marked upturn in fortunes for the average North Korean.

It would take painstaking negotiations to get China on board; any bid for reunification would require ironclad reassurances to China that a unified Korea would not put US troops on its border, and a pledge to keep US forces below the 38th parallel would likely not be enough. The United States may have to withdraw from Korea altogether – a small price to pay for peace at long last.

The ultimate outcome here would be the elimination of a major global threat, the reunification of Korea, a regional détente between the US and China, and the return of some 30,000 US troops home. The price would be a painful war, but this whole scenario is predicated on a situation in which North Korea has made war unavoidable anyways. If that's the case, why not use diplomacy to guarantee a favorable outcome, and to reduce casualties by keeping China out of it?

The key to either of these plans working would be the careful completion of good-faith negotiations beforehand. While Chinese and US officials do their best to make relations between the two appear merely uneasy, the reality is decidedly more negative; Washington sees China as a snowballing power bent on usurping US hegemony, while Beijing sees the United States as the dying empire determined to prevent China from replacing it.

Cooperation has proved elusive as the world's two largest economies find their interests often seem to clash, and that is generally the unsettling reality. But Korea policy is a rare bright spot where their interests align; neither has a clear upper hand on the issue, and both would benefit from a more stable Korean Peninsula. If they can find an arrangement that removes a regional irritant while preserving the geopolitical balance, it is in their interests to do so.

Lastly, it is critical that any deal between China and the US have ample input from nearby Japan, and full buy-in from the nation with the most to lose: South Korea. To strike an agreement of profound impact on the Korean Peninsula without Seoul's approval would be nothing less than a betrayal of one of the US' closest allies.

Only by ensuring that all sides know the play going in and stick to it throughout can an already fraught situation be prevented from spiraling out of control. The US will have to be prepared to enforce any agreement with all its diplomatic and military might, but if all goes according to plan, it will have created a breakthrough template for cooperation with

China to resolve contentious geopolitical issues in a way that benefits everyone.

The status quo is unsustainable, with North Korea rapidly approaching a level of menace that the United States will not be able to tolerate. Given President Trump's volatility, it's difficult to say when that threshold will be crossed, but when it is, China will be faced with a stark choice: invest untold resources in an open-ended war of uncertain outcome, or strike a deal to stay out of the fray and still get to keep its buffer. The decision is easy.

Some will deride these plans as imperialistic meddling, but the hard truth is that North Korea is a threat that must be managed. These ideas come closer than anything tried thus far to addressing the underlying sources of instability on the peninsula: grave economic disparity, intensifying Sino-American jockeying, and the bitter divisions of a Korean War that never officially ended. They move the region towards a more stable situation, and that is certainly a prerequisite for lasting solutions.

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