

COMMENTARY

On U.S. North Korea Policy

Mighty America must exercise magnanimity over North Korea

By George Koo

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At 100 kilotons, North Korea's latest underground nuclear blast was around 10 times as great as the one last year and more than 100 times as great as its first underground test back in 2006. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has raised the stakes by claiming to have set off its first hydrogen bomb.

The US reaction has predictably been more of the same old.

More condemnation. More sanctions. More threats of reprisals of overwhelming force. As if to set the stage for actual reprisal to come, Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the United Nations, accused the North Koreans of "begging for war".

For nearly two decades, America's response to the DPRK has been to resort to ratcheting up the tension against it. In turn, the DPRK's response to this increased pressure has been to detonate a bigger bomb or fire an intercontinental missile with longer range. Neither side has succeeded in getting the other to back down.

In early 1994, Bill Clinton's White House began to contemplate making a preemptive surgical strike on Yongbyon, a location on the northeast coast of North Korea where weapons development was under way.

According to Dr. William Perry, then US secretary of defense, Pyongyang invited former president Jimmy Carter to visit North Korea, whereupon the North Koreans expressed to him that they had an interest in beginning

negotiations. Carter promptly conveyed this sentiment to president Clinton.

War was averted and both sides quickly arrived at an "Agreed Framework" by the end of 1994. The basic terms of the Agreed Framework were that the DPRK would halt producing plutonium and not build large reactors that could be used to produce weapons-grade fissionable material. Japan and South Korea would each build a light-water reactor in the DPRK for power generation and the US would supply fuel oil until those reactors were built.

The framework held, albeit tenuously, until the end of Clinton's second term. Perceptions and expectations of what the framework meant were very different on both sides. The North Koreans were hoping that it would lead to a bilateral treaty that would give them assurances of no US intention for regime change. A ceasefire armistice since the end of the Korean War seemed too flimsy to offer them a sense of security.

The US side considered the framework as an in-formal agreement that would not require ratification by the US Senate – a way of keeping nuclear non-proliferation on the Korean Peninsula out of domestic politics. In fact, persistent congressional opposition to the DPRK meant reduced funding for the fuel-oil shipments, causing delays and shortfalls in those shipments.

When George W Bush entered the White House, he was not interested in dealing with a member of the "axis of evil". The bad blood came to a head in 2003 when an American delegation went to Pyongyang and, in a public confrontation



American Psycho vs Korean Psycho. / [Image by Matt From London via Flickr, CC BY 2.0]

without any pretense at diplomacy, accused the North Koreans of violating the Agreed Framework via covert nuclear-weapons development.

On its side, the DPRK had not seen any sign of the completion of the two light-water reactors promised nearly nine years earlier, and only intermittent deliveries of fuel oil. Each side had plenty of reason to accuse the other of dealing in bad faith. Distrust and suspicion have poisoned relations ever since.

In response to worldwide condemnation, the DPRK has cleaved to the line that its nuclear-weapon development is for self-defense and a “gift package” for the US. In point of fact, the North Koreans see no other recourse against the US threat of regime change. The fate of Muammar Gaddafi, of Libya, who publicly gave up nuclear weapons but was re-moved from power anyway, serves to remind them of the alternative fate awaiting.

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As the imbroglio deepens, world opinion is shifting toward caution and moderation, not so much in sympathy for the puny underdog taking on the hegemon but out of concern that the confrontation, with-out a course correction, could

lead to catastrophic consequences exceeding any rational imagination.

The people of South Korea are relatively blasé about the actions of their neighbor to the north because they believe they understand the North Koreans. They fear instead US President Donald Trump because of his unpredictability and the seeming opacity hiding his real intentions.

Their newly elected president, Moon Jae-in, has advanced the notion of continuing dialogue with the North. President Trump has accused Moon of appeasement, but surely as the next-door neighbor, South Korea has more at stake than the US, which exists in relative safety thousands of kilometers away.

Moon is not the only one to suggest letting talks begin. Presidents Vladimir Putin of Russia and Xi Jinping of China, while joining in the near-universal disapproval and condemnation of the DPRK, have also proclaimed that negotiation is the only viable approach.

Even the mainstream media in the US are coming to the same conclusion: namely that talks are necessary to reduce the tension. Key members of the Trump team such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis would not rule out diplomatic solutions. State Secretary Rex Tillerson has allowed that he would be open to talks if certain conditions are met.

With 12 times the population of North Korea, and military and economic power of a much greater magnitude of multiples, it would seem that mighty America can afford the magnanimity of making the first gesture of accommodation. But even then, the US diplomatic effort would need infinite patience to gradually overcome the years of bad blood and dis-trust.

Perhaps another high-profile emissary to Pyongyang is needed to break the ice. Instead of former president Jimmy Carter, might not Bill Clinton fill the bill? As I have suggested previously, it's time to think and act differently about North Korea.

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