

GUEST ESSAY

A Solution on North Korea Is There, if Biden Will Only Grasp It

March 16, 2024

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How do you solve a problem like North Korea?

Since the end of the Cold War, it seems that every formula, from threatening war to promising peace, has been tried. And yet, despite being under more sanctions than just about any other country, North Korea developed a nuclear arsenal estimated at 50 warheads and sophisticated missiles that can, in theory, deliver those weapons to targets in the continental United States.

President Biden's administration has taken a notably more ambivalent approach toward North Korea than his predecessor Donald Trump, who alternately railed at and courted its leader, Kim Jong-un. But we shouldn't stop trying to come up with bold ways to denuclearize North Korea, improve the

lives of its people or lessen the risks of conflict, even if that means making unpalatable choices. On the contrary, there is more urgency now than there has been for years.

As the analyst Robert Carlin and the nuclear scientist Siegfried Hecker, two experienced North Korea watchers, warned in January, Mr. Kim has shifted away from pursuing better relations with the United States and South Korea and closer to President Vladimir Putin of Russia and may be preparing for war. Just days after the two experts issued their warning, Mr. Kim disavowed the long-cherished goal of peaceful reconciliation between the two Koreas, and he called for “completely occupying, subjugating and reclaiming” the South if war breaks out.

It might seem preposterous, even suicidal, for Mr. Kim to seek war. But many people in Ukraine doubted that Mr. Putin would launch a full invasion, right up until the rockets began landing in February 2022, and Hamas caught Israel completely by surprise in October. Both conflicts have had devastating human tolls and are severely taxing America’s ability to manage concurrent crises. The people of both Koreas certainly don’t need war, and neither does the United States.

Mr. Kim’s grandfather started the Korean War, and his father was a master of brinkmanship. Mr. Kim is cut from the same cloth and could instigate a limited conflict by, for example, launching an amphibious assault on South Korean-controlled islands in disputed waters of the Yellow Sea, less than 15 miles off North Korea’s coast. North Korea shelled one of the islands in 2010, killing two South Korean military personnel and two civilians and triggering an exchange of artillery with the South. Just two months ago, Pyongyang fired more than 200 shells into waters near the islands.

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Mr. Kim may believe he can manage escalation of such a crisis — threatening missile or even nuclear attack to deter retaliation, perhaps taking the islands, then spinning it as a great propaganda victory and demanding a redrawing of maritime boundaries and other security concessions.

If anything like that scenario came to pass, Mr. Biden would have to explain another outbreak of war on his watch to weary American voters. And it would provide Mr. Trump an opportunity to trumpet his willingness to engage with Mr. Kim.

The mutual distrust between Washington and Pyongyang has only deepened under Mr. Biden, making a breakthrough seem unlikely. Yet there are two underappreciated dynamics at play in North Korea where the United States might find leverage.

The first is China. Despite the veneer of Communist kinship, Mr. Kim and President Xi Jinping of China are nationalists at heart, and they watch each other warily. I have made numerous visits to both nations' capitals and met with officials and policy shapers. The sense of deep mutual distrust is palpable. Many Chinese look down on neighboring North Korea as backward and are annoyed by its destabilizing behavior. Many North Koreans resent China's success and resist its influence; Pyongyang could allow much more Chinese investment but doesn't want to be indebted to Chinese capital. And Mr. Kim seems to delight in timing provocations for maximum embarrassment in Beijing, including testing weapons — prohibited by U.N. sanctions — in the lead-up to sensitive Chinese political events.

Mr. Kim waited six years after becoming the paramount leader in 2011 before making a trip to Beijing to meet Mr. Xi. When Covid emerged, North Korea was among the first countries to shut its borders with China, and ties atrophied during those nearly three years of closure. Last year Mr. Kim chose Mr. Putin, not Mr. Xi, for his first postpandemic summit, skipping China to travel to Russia's far east. Mr. Kim's distrust of China is an opening for the United States.

The second point is Mr. Kim's economic ambitions. For every speech mentioning nukes, he talks at much greater length about the poor state of his nation's economy while promising to improve it. It was the prospect of American-led economic sanctions being lifted that persuaded him to make the 60-hour train ride from Pyongyang to Hanoi to meet then-President Trump for their second summit in 2019. Mr. Kim explicitly offered to dismantle his main nuclear weapons complex, but Mr. Trump demanded the North also turn over all of its nuclear weapons, material and facilities. The talks collapsed, and Mr. Trump seemed to lose interest in dealing with Mr. Kim. A rare opportunity was wasted, leaving Mr. Kim embittered.

The key to any new overture to North Korea is how it is framed. The White House won't like to hear this, but success will probably depend on Mr. Biden putting his fingerprints all over the effort, by, for example, nominating a new White House envoy with the stature of someone like John Kerry and announcing a sweeping policy on North Korea and an intelligence review. Only the president can get through to Mr. Kim, and only Mr. Kim can change North Korean policy.

Mr. Biden also would need to use radically different language in framing a new overture as an effort to improve relations and aid North Korea's economy — not to denuclearize a country that in 2022 passed a law declaring itself a nuclear weapons state. Yes, that would be a bitter pill for America to swallow: Denuclearization has been a guiding principle of U.S. policy toward North Korea for decades. But it is unrealistic to pretend that Pyongyang will surrender its nuclear weapons anytime soon. Disarmament can remain a long-term goal but is impossible if the two sides aren't even talking.

Mr. Biden's Republican opponents might accuse him of appeasement by engaging with Mr. Kim, but that is precisely what Mr. Trump tried. Mr. Kim, likewise, might mistake boldness for weakness. But it would be easy enough for the United States to pull back from diplomacy if it goes nowhere.

The United States must be realistic. The world is very different from when the United States, China, Russia, Japan and the two Koreas came together in the 2000s for negotiations to denuclearize North Korea. The country is now a formidable nuclear power, and its leader sounds increasingly belligerent. The president needs to get the wheels of diplomacy turning before it's too late.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section SR, Page 10 of the New York edition with the headline: Biden's Next Crisis Might Be in North Korea