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De-escalation on Korean Peninsula: The Why and How

By Harry Sa

Synopsis

While the nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula may not result in war, the tensions are counterproductive for all parties involved. Installing a few pressure relief valves in the US-DPRK relationship keep crises from boiling over and prevent miscalculation. Unconditional bilateral meetings and establishing a hotline are a start.

Commentary

WITH THE North Korean nuclear threat as precarious as ever, the probabilities of an all-out war, or a nuclear attack, on the Korean Peninsula remain miniscule though the United States and North Korea lack a reliable way to de-escalate tensions. Maintaining tensions at these levels are unsustainable for all parties involved.

South Korea, Japan, China, and, of course, the US each have a whole host of domestic issues that need to be urgently addressed. In addition to their domestic woes, the US has other international commitments that demand attention. China, during its recent party congress, is breaking in its new leadership while, at the same time, signaling to the world that it is ready to emerge as a global player beyond its familiar and immediate sub-regions of North and Southeast Asia. The only state reaping benefit from this brouhaha is North Korea.

Pyongyang's Dual-track Strategy

Heightened tensions play a significant role in North Korea's domestic and international politics. First and foremost, it exacerbates the communist state's threat perception of the US, which in turn, only speeds up development of nuclear and ballistic missile arsenals. Secondly, the Kim regime gains legitimacy as Pyongyang elites and North

Korean citizens can see that their country is eliciting such a strong reaction from the world's great powers and institutions. For a nation of 25 million largely impoverished citizens with GDP that is roughly half that of Rhode Island, North Korea is commanding an absurd level of attention.

And lastly, the tensions mesh well with the Kim regime's narratives, interests, and policy. North Korea has fiercely cultivated a siege mentality into its national psyche, spurring development of such weapons. These weapons serve the double purpose of being a deterrent, as well as a potential bargaining chip to rid the region of American presence and ensure the promise of future noninterference.

Also, Pyongyang has shifted from a military-first stance to the *byungjin line*, a dual track that aims to concurrently develop the economy and nuclear weapons. Asymmetric deterrence such as nuclear weapons allows Pyongyang to free up resources to develop its economy rather than spending it on maintaining and expanding conventional capabilities.

"Maximum Pressure, No Engagement"

North Korea's nuclear weapons cannot be blamed on Donald Trump. It is an inherited mess stemming from the miscalculations and torpor of successive US administrations starting from President Clinton. However, the current tensions are a direct result of Donald Trump's North Korea policy. Dubbed "maximum pressure with engagement," the incumbent administration's new approach to North Korea was unveiled earlier this year in April 2017.

The rationale is simple: pressure North Korea so that pursuit of nuclear weapons is uncomfortable, then use engagement to redirect and shape its future choices. At first glance, it is a reasonable policy, but closer examination reveals that it has been an exercise in futility.

True to the first half of its name, the US has been increasing pressure on multiple fronts. The United States, whether through official statements or the president's many tweets, is as vocal as ever condemning North Korea's nuclear capabilities. It has led the levying of another round of stinging UN sanctions on the embattled regime and fiercely prodding China to follow suit. American allies South Korea and Japan are following the lead of the US and echoing Trump's maximum pressure policy.

South Korea's newly elected president, Moon Jae-in, took a hard right-turn after campaigning on a more liberal and dovish stance on North Korea. Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, fresh from his landslide victory, is once again taking a long, cold look at his country's pacifist clause, citing North Korea as a primary concern. The problem is that the crucial second half of Trump's North Korea policy is missing: where is the engagement?

Installing Pressure Relief Valves

In any mechanical system where pressure can build up to dangerous levels, there are often legal obligations to install a safety mechanism, often some form of pressure relief valves, to protect those systems from excessive pressure. The same should apply to

US-North Korean relations, and low-level engagement would act as those valves. A good start would actually be Trump's North Korea policy.

Along with "maximum pressure with engagement," Secretary of State Rex Tillerson outlined a set of excellent guiding principles to further define America's approach called the Four Nos: no seeking regime change, no seeking regime collapse, no forced reunification, and no American forces north of the 38th parallel.

Whenever the situation threatens to get out of hand, every official working under the Trump administration should be harping on these principles loudly and repeatedly in every official statement, media interview, or even directly to Pyongyang. It is imperative to signal that the Four Nos is unambiguously American policy.

Next Step: Dialogue

The next step is to begin some form of unconditional and reiterant dialogue. To be clear, the goal of this dialogue is not denuclearisation or reunification. That is far too ambitious. Instead, the US and North Korea need to ease back into the habit of interaction. The goal is to develop a shared vocabulary, a pattern of cooperation, and an increased level of familiarity in order to minimise misunderstanding. Once this is achieved, Washington and Pyongyang should establish a hotline to directly communicate with one another during times of crisis.

Even during the most dangerous periods of the Cold War, the US and the Soviet Union managed to establish and maintain a direct link using a wire telegraph circuit connecting two teletype terminals and a radio circuit as a backup system. In 2017, with instant communication in the hands of elementary school students, is there any valid excuse not to have such a link between the two countries?

This is not nearly exhaustive. To reiterate, these mechanisms are nowhere near sufficient to bring about peace on the Korean peninsula. However, they may help stave off tensions and build a solid foundation to eventually achieve those goals. For too long, the international community has allowed the situation on the peninsula to calcify, and even the smallest progress towards peace is immediately derailed by periodical bouts of intense confrontation. Both Pyongyang and Washington must make the decision to break away from this pattern.

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