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Report

Qat No Good Options in North Korea: Trump's Disparaging Language Reveals US Failure in East Asia

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North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un visiting the Fatherland Liberation War Martyrs Cemetery in Pyongyang [Getty Images]

Introduction

In a barrage of tweets from his New Jersey golf course, US President Donald Trump formulated his country's foreign policy in the strangest way possible. Not only did he dismiss any possible diplomatic resolution to the nuclear standoff between the US and North Korea using social media, he publicly told his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson not to bother exploring the diplomatic option with Pyongyang.

Tillerson is "wasting his time trying to negotiate with little rocket man," Trumped tweeted in reference to North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Part of a larger war of words between the North Korean and US leaders, the "rocket man"⁽¹⁾ reference was originally made by Trump at his first United Nations appearance last September.

True, the nature of the rhetoric in Trump's speech⁽²⁾ at the UN General Assembly was largely predictable. Even his bizarre threat to "totally destroy North Korea" was not entirely new to his uniquely bizarre political discourse. But Trump alone cannot be blamed for Washington's failure to navigate a successful end to the North Korean nuclear crisis, which threatens US allies in East Asia and the Pacific.

Failed Policy

Not only did the US mishandle the crisis, it also used it as a political fodder to unite its allies against the hyped potential of North Korea to supposedly destroy the US-led political order in the Pacific.

Trump's strange language aside, a quick comparison between Trump's UN speech with the first⁽³⁾ and last⁽⁴⁾ UN speeches of President Barack Obama reveals that

Washington's political discourse in regards to Pyongyang has been predictable and sterile for years.

In their speeches, both Obama and Trump waved the military option and used the language of coercion and threats.

For example, Obama's 2016 speech, although more articulate than Trump's, threatened North Korea with 'consequences' while portraying the East Asian country, which possesses – compared to the US - few confirmed nuclear heads as if an existential threat to all of mankind.

"We cannot escape the prospect of nuclear war unless we all commit to stopping the spread of nuclear weapons and pursuing a world without them," Obama said. "When North Korea tests a bomb that endangers all of us. And any country that breaks this basic bargain must face consequences."

Trump's words pursued the same objectives, although in a deliberately tougher language.

"North Korea's reckless pursuit of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles threatens the entire world with unthinkable loss of human life," Trump said. "The United States has great strength and patience, but if it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea."

Unfazed

But none of that registered with North Korean. Nor it should have been expected to change that country's policies. Since the US-led Korean war, the US has pursued a confrontational policy that produced no tangible results, aside from keeping North and South Korea locked in a permanent state of hostilities.

In fact, soon after Trump's threat to destroy all of North Korea, Pyongyang fired a number of ballistic missiles over northern Japan.

Expectedly, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe used harsh and threatening language⁽⁵⁾ to describe the North Korean move. Although he possesses few political cards, he needed to appear tough in a situation where his country is trapped in imprudent confrontation between its US ally and the North Korean foe.

"We must make North Korea abandon all nuclear and ballistic missile programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner," the Japanese leader said. "What is needed to do that is not dialogue, but pressure."

But what does that mean exactly by 'pressure'? More sanctions?

North Korea is already under unprecedentedly harsh sanctions, yet somehow it is able to survive.

One such survival techniques has been the secret sale of arms to other countries, one of which is Egypt, itself a US ally.

The recent interception of a North Korean vessel making its way towards the Suez Canal revealed a complex clandestine deal(6) involving the Egyptian military. The shipment of weapons included 30,000 rocket-propelled grenades valued at \$23 million.

Later it emerged that Washington's decision to delay \$300 million in military aid to Cairo was a result of this particular finding.

The War Option

So, if diplomatic channels are to be closed, and sanctions are somehow circumvented, what would Trump's war option looks like?

US Newsweek magazine took on this very disturbing question(7) only to provide equally worrying answers, as provided by top US military sources who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"If combat broke out between the two countries, American commanders in the Pacific would very quickly exhaust their stockpiles of smart bombs and missiles, possibly within a week," military sources revealed.

It will take a year for the US military to replenish their stockpile, thus leaving them with the option of "dropping crude gravity bombs on their targets, guaranteeing a longer and bloodier conflict for both sides."

Expectedly, North Korea would strike at will all of US allies in the region, starting with South Korea.

Even if the conflict does not escalate to the use of nuclear weapons, the death toll from such a war "could reach 1 million." But what if nuclear weapons are used?

Apocalypse

Not too far away from Seattle, Washington there are eight ballistic-missile submarines carrying the world's largest shipments of nuclear weapons.

The 560-foot-long black submarines are docked at the Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, hauling what is described by Rick Anderson in a recent Los Angeles Times article(8) as "the largest concentration of deployed nuclear weapons in the US."

"If it were a sovereign nation," Anderson wrote, quoting government estimates, "Washington State would be the third-largest nuclear-weapons power in the world."

Many were haunted by this manifest reality, especially whenever a nuclear crisis between the US and North Korea flares up, such as the one which started late July. At the time, Trump threatened Pyongyang(9) with "fire and fury like the world has never seen before". Kim Jong-un seemed undaunted.

Visiting Kitsap-Bangor early August, US Defense Secretary, James N. Mattis, toured the USS Kentucky and declared that the submarine is ready for action, if needed.

The nuclear load that the USS Kentucky alone carries is equal to 1,400 bombs, the size of which the US dropped and subsequently destroyed Hiroshima, Japan in 1945.

North Korea's saber-rattling in recent months - which are a repeat of previous episodes such as in April of this year and twice last year - should be cause for alarm. But far scarier(10) is the fact that North Korea's entire nuclear stockpiles consist of up to 60 nuclear weapons, compared with 6,970 owned by the US, out of which 1,750 are operational.

To place these numbers in a global perspective, there are an estimated(11) 15,000 nuclear weapons, worldwide.

While the North Koreans require a sixth successful test to put a nuclear warhead on an intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM), the US had conducting 1,030 such nuclear tests, starting in July 1945.

Surely, one cannot excuse the foolish and desperate behavior of Pyongyang and its 'beloved leader'. But there is more to this crisis than Kim Jong-un and his antics.

'Not a Good Partner'

In mainstream US media, North Korea is often referred to as a 'highly secretive nation'. Such references give pundits and politicians an uncontested platform to make whatever

assumptions that suit them. But the legacy of the Korean War (1950-53), which divided Korea and its peoples is hardly a secret. An estimated 4 million people were killed in that most savage war,(12) including 2 million Korean civilians.

The US and its allies fought that war under the flag of the nascent United Nations. It is not very difficult to imagine why North Koreans detest the US, distrust US allies and loathe the UN and its repeated sanctions, especially as the country often suffers from food insecurity - among others problems.

The North Korean leadership must also be following the development between Iran and the US regarding the nuclear deal signed in 2015.

While the two issues are often discussed separately, they must be linked for various reasons.

One of these reasons is that North Korea, too, reached several understandings(13) with the US through mediators in the 1990s and 2000s to curb its nuclear program. In 2005, it agreed to ditch "all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs."

The issue was never pursued with the necessary seriousness, partly because the US is in need for some kind of a threat to justify its military presence in East Asia, in order to challenge the rising Chinese influence there.

But the cost of that policy comes at a high price, as the nuclear menace is once again emerging, repeating previous scenarios and setting the stage for an all-out conflict.

Iran has no nuclear weapons. The nuclear deal it reached with the west - officially called the Joint Comprehensive Plan for Action - required the lifting of most sanctions on Tehran, in exchange for the latter curbing its nuclear program.

However, following the agreement, a short-lived period of relative calm between Tehran and Washington ended with renewed hostility. US Ambassador to the UN, Nikki Haley, is pushing for more sanctions against Iran, prompting Iranian President, Hasan Rouhani, to warn that his country is ready to cancel the nuclear deal 'within hours'(14) if new sanctions are imposed.

Rouhani dubbed Washington "not a good partner."

Having also reached their own conclusions that Washington is "not a good partner", the North Koreans seem determine to acquire the ICBM-class ballistic missiles, needed to miniaturize nuclear weapons to fit warheads. By achieving this disturbing milestone,

Pyongyang would feel that it has a good chance to reach a more concrete agreement in future negotiations with Washington.

The China Connection

The latter, at least for now, is using the flare-up with North Korea to further advance its 'pivot to Asia', a thus-far failed process that began under the Obama administration. The motive behind the policy is encircling China(15) with US allies and military hardware that would prevent the Chinese military from expanding its influence past its immediate territorial waters.

Certainly, China has been frustrated by North Korea's behavior for some time and has, in fact, joined Russia and others to mount more UN sanctions on Pyongyang. However, considering that China fully understands that Washington's behavior is largely motivated by its desire to halt an expansionist China, Beijing knows that the battle for North Korea is also a fight for China's own regional leadership(16).

In a recent editorial, the 'Global Times', published by the Chinese Communist Party's official People's Daily had this message(17) for both Washington and Pyongyang:

"If North Korea launches missiles that threaten US soil first and the US retaliates, China will stay neutral," it wrote. "But if the US and its ally, South Korea, take on Pyongyang and try to "overthrow the North Korean regime and change the political pattern of the Korean Peninsula, China will prevent them from doing so."

'Deterrence'?

While many in Washington focused on the word 'neutral', they paid little heed to the phrase "will prevent them." China is clearly speaking of a military intervention, as both China and North Korea are still allies following a treaty they signed in 1961.

Both Trump and Kim are unsavory figures, driven by fragile egos and unsound judgement. Yet, they are both in a position that, if not reigned in soon, could threaten global security and the lives of millions.

Yet, the problem is far greater than two unhinged leaders. There are seven other countries(18) that possess nuclear weapons: Russia, India, Pakistan, Israel, United Kingdom, China and France. These weapons have only one horrific use.

If the intention is, indeed, to make the world a safe place, there is no need for anyone to possess them, for 'deterrence' purposes or any other. Neither Washington, nor Pyongyang, Tel Aviv or anyone else should hold the world hostage, exacting political and economic ransom in exchange for not destroying the planet.

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