

## On the Sidelines of Nuclear Crisis

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Canadians watch from the side lines as the crisis on the Korean Peninsula has spiraled upward, creating the greatest risk of the use of nuclear weapons since the Cuban Missile Crisis over 50 years ago.

That 1962 standoff was averted, at the brink, through cool-headed diplomacy and courage of leadership. It is the absence of such leadership, rhetorical restraint, and dialogue that makes the current situation so perilous. Trump's and Kim Jung Un's trading of childish caricatures and insults has created an egoists' standoff, fraught with the possibility of accidents and mistaken judgments triggering catastrophic results. The proverbial nuclear clock, as measured against North Korean provocative testing, is approaching midnight.

How to avoid missteps and establish a stable deterrent equilibrium among the key players, given the looming reality of a North Korean nuclear state, presents an enormous challenge. The risks of failure are extensive; the room for creative maneuver by Washington, Beijing, Pyongyang is extremely narrow.

Yet, first steps must be taken, back channels explored, and two step forward-one step back frustrations managed. The scope for positive, proactive engagement by outsiders like Canada is very limited, but more feasible in the longer term through multilateral initiatives and people-to-people engagement. Should outright conflict break out, Canada, while unlikely participant, will need to be prepared for massive humanitarian challenges in its aftermath.

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“Objective” considerations aside, Pyongyang's leaders believe that they have been under threat of elimination by the United States and its allies since their state's emergence in 1948. Pyongyang, for economic, strategic, *and* ideological reasons, views its survival contingent on attaining a second-strike nuclear capacity, i.e. the ability to attack if provoked and respond if attacked against targets in and across the Pacific. Gadhafi's fate and Saddam's demise have reinforced this conviction, enhanced further by President Trump's direct threats and ongoing campaign to revoke the Iran nuclear deal.

Pyongyang's aspirations to nuclear power status, germinated in the early 1990s, culminated in Kim Jung Un's rhetorical declaration of North Korea as Nuclear State at the UN in 2016. This aspiration has moved with surprising rapidity towards reality. The consensus of analysts, in the aftermath of the 15 missiles tests thus far in 2017, and

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<sup>1</sup> Note: This is an abbreviated version of a longer, foot-noted piece to be released by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada in its *Canada Asia Agenda* series. Please look to this for a fuller treatment.

September's nuclear weapon test (the 5<sup>th</sup> since 2006) is that Kim Jung Un with refinements, and possible additional tests, will achieve his ambition to be able to strike the continental US within six to 12 months.

The ever-tightening regime of economic sanctions imposed through the UN Security Council and bilaterally by the US and others have had little impact on the speed and success of North Korean nuclear and missile programs. The most recent sanctions, with bans on textile exports and significant cuts on oil imports, endorsed unanimously by the Council, are amplified by those announced by the US targeting individuals, banks, and corporations with dealings with North Korea. The latter and the rhetoric around them have shifted the tone from sanctions as pressure tactics to sanctions as "economic war" to destroy the regime. But these again are expected to be marginally effective: their impact will come to bear too late to alter the current nuclear advancement, the impact will be borne by the already stricken North Korean citizenry leaving its leadership relatively unscathed, and cannot overcome the millenarian, ideological zeal of Kim and his people.

China is critical to any effort to influence the North Korean regime. It holds a virtual monopoly on North Korea's trade (roughly 90 % overall, in which oil imports, textile and coal exports play central roles.), giving China a chokehold that could force a North Korean a retreat, or at least a halt, on its nuclear path. Beijing's calculus, however, is a much more complex consideration of regional and global forces--its fundamental geostrategic interest is in sustaining a non-unified North Korea as a buffer zone and diminishing the dominant US military presence in the region. Beijing and Pyongyang find themselves trapped in a relationship, which each finds intensely unsatisfactory—Kim viewing China as no longer a reliable ally, unwilling to guarantee his regime, and pushing too hard for internal reform; Xi regarding Kim as recalcitrant, ungrateful, and bringing ever greater security threats to China as the US and its allies respond to Pyongyang's military adventurism with increased regional deployments, especially missile defence systems to Japan and South Korea.

External pressure, largely from the Trump administration, and increasing disaffection with North Korea's refusal to halt its march to a nuclear state sees Beijing now endorsing the tightened, UNSC authorized sanctions, and committed to clamping down harder on North's oil imports and key exports. While a full embargo of China's oil exports might bring Kim Jung Un to heel, China will mitigate its economic and political relationship to keep the Kim dynasty on life support.

Once in the White House, the dimensions of the North Korean conundrum have hit home to Trump, with the realization that there is no silver bullet. Yet, diplomacy and negotiation are publically spurned, castigated as gestures of appeasement. Even Steve Bannon, the archetypic conservative, concurred "there is no military solution [to North Korea's nuclear threats]; and, indeed, goes so far as to admit "they got us."

US diplomats are beleaguered. Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, is in an increasingly untenable position. On the one hand, his time is spent reassuring allies of US security guarantees, pushing China to clamp down further on the North, and stressing the

administration's adamant policy of denuclearization prior to any talks. On the other hand, and not unexpectedly, (and despite his boss' ridicule), he has explored various channels with Pyongyang, seeking communication, if not dialogue and negotiation. He has sought to dampen North Korean fears of the US by committing to a policy of four noes: to regime change, to regime collapse, to accelerated reunification, and to sending forces north of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel.

At the same time, Tillerson knows and warns that time is running out ... with his eyes as much towards Washington and towards Pyongyang.

Whether or not Trump, with his antics, is putting up a smoke screen, i.e., advancing a purposeful strategy of sowing confusion, bewildering the North Koreans into thinking that he might well attack, and thus pushing them towards the negotiating table that Secretary of State has proffered, is frankly unknowable.

Little about Kim Jung provides reassurance. His assessment that nuclear capability is his only assurance of regime survival, coupled with the state's cultivation of his invincibility, and reinforced by his ruthless and immature personality provide a frightening match up with the US President. Analogies to 1914, recollection of the fatal foibles of leaders, and allusions to the dangers of "mad men" theories tipping the balance towards war abound.

... *"diplomacy until the first bomb drops,"* Rex Tillerson

The hard reality is that avoiding war means a negotiated solution; a negotiated solution means compromises on all sides. To date this prospect has been anathema to Washington and Pyongyang--the latter refusing to negotiate until recognized as a Nuclear State, the former vowing that this can never happen. Avoiding disaster dictates that a conversation must begin.

Where and how to begin? What policies and strategies might propel incremental, positive steps? Most options discussed converge around "Pause for pause," or "freeze for freeze," or "double pause" rubrics, all referring to the two sides, effectively "taking deep breaths," and through increasingly regularized communication, softening the edges of their hardline positions. It is a long way, however, to the oft noted "pause for pause" that would involve North Korea halting its testing and the US in turn halting military exercises and other "provocative" gestures. To date direct bilateral feelers hinted at by both parties (in New York, Beijing, Pyongyang itself, and European cities) have been publically rebuffed, but one must assume remain open.

China is certain to be involved. It alone wields the economic tools that could cripple the Kim regime; it also is North Korea's guarantor of survival on the Peninsula. How it leverages its influence on Washington and Pyongyang will be critical. Xi Jinping assuredly sees both his national interests and reputation as a global power at stake, but remains preoccupied with solidifying his hold on power for the upcoming Party Congress, (commencing October 18.)

The bottom line: There appears to be no avoidance of the acceptance of a nuclear-capable North Korea, however constrained. Living with the odious Kim regime will be politically and morally painful. If not managed carefully it could bring enormous loss of face for the US and for Trump personally--indeed, quite possibly too great a potential personal embarrassment for the volatile president to abide, triggering the real risk of a lash out that pushes all over the brink. On the other hand, a sword of Damocles hangs over Kim Jung Un. His survival is dependent on achieving nuclear power status, but can this be accomplished without provoking a conflict with the US—bringing an assured end to his survival?

With the end of the Cold War, Canada looked in the late 1990s to recognize North Korea and in 2001 open diplomatic relations, however, little progress was achieved towards normalization. With the nuclear tests of 2010, Canada joined in imposing what PM Harper characterized as “the toughest sanctions in the world,” as part of its policy of “controlled engagement.” This remains on the books today. Diplomatic relations with North Korea are curtailed. A limited number of visits go on, with our interests being managed through the Swedish embassy in Pyongyang.

The Trudeau government, in line with its overall attitude towards (re)engagement of non-like minded states, did encourage Foreign Minister Dion to explore possibilities on the Peninsula. But, little has evolved. Our diplomatic tone has changed somewhat in tune with Ottawa’s multilateral inclinations; condemnations of Pyongyang’s tests now have appended sentences encouraging dialogue as the only path to a long-term solution.

That limited lines of communication do remain open was apparent with the recent visit of a high level, official delegation from Ottawa, headed by National Security Advisor, Daniel Jean, to gain the return to Canada of Pastor Lim. This was a notable culmination of behind the scenes diplomacy. Whether or not it involved some quiet agreement on managing future relations has yet to be revealed.

Canada’s most active engagement with the North has been through its humanitarian assistance and people to people relationships. Official aid has for many years been delivered through UN auspices. Also over many years, Canadian religious groups, with a long missionary heritage, have looked to the plight of the North Korean people by sponsoring delegations (e.g. United Church of Canada), directly providing relief and food (e.g. the Mennonite Central Committee), and supporting the efforts of NGOs. While some NGOs have ceased activities, or had them terminated, (e.g. the Canadian Food Grains Bank), others remain active, such as First Step, devoted to child nutrition. These groups seek to avoid political controversy. The Han Voice organization, alternately, advocates for human rights, lobbies in Canada, and devises proactive strategies to disseminate information across the DMZ. Korean church communities in Canada have sponsored active programs delivering humanitarian assistance and supplies in the North, but must carefully avoid being seen to proselytize.

Regional players no longer regard Ottawa as an engaged player on matters of North Korea. They see us with little skin in the game and thin networks from which to mobilize.

This has not deterred concerned Canadian observers, especially former diplomats, from prodding Ottawa to assume a more proactive, facilitative role, nor even Canadian diplomats, such as Ambassador to China, John McCallum, offering to do so.

A number of possibilities present themselves to the government and to concerned Canadians and NGOs, these both for the short and long term.

*For the moment:* The first, of course, is remaining open to being a conduit between the concerned parties, being alert to niches through which communication and information can be funneled, particularly to Pyongyang. Canada has in the past served as a neutral meeting place for disputants, e.g. the US and Cuba, and while this opportunity is infeasible concerning North Korea, our diplomatic personnel and facilities abroad are resources that could prove of service.

Second, sustaining our humanitarian assistance programs is important, not only for relief to North Koreans in need, but also to make apparent to Pyongyang that Canada continues this support, even in the face of political/security tensions. Canada needs to be seen to be equally attentive to the human security crises that pervade the North.

Third, increasing exposure for both sides in informal, unofficial contexts is a priority. This includes support and expansion of NGO activities and people-to-people initiatives. It also should encompass Canadian Track 2 initiatives for regularized and ad hoc meetings of experts, academics, and officials (retired or in their acting, but private capacities). Beyond regional security dialogues, an array of functional issues, including energy infrastructure, agricultural practices, environmental sustainability are highly relevant to North Korea – all topics on which Canada has extensive expertise. Limited sharing of this expertise quietly goes on now, e.g. through the Korea Knowledge Partnership program at UBC, which brings a small cohort of North Korean academics to campus for courses in market economics.

On the broader international stage, Canada should look to engagement with regional and international partners, especially in partnership with other activist “middle powers” like Australia and the Scandinavian states. This would involve acting to ensure that when actions are taken to sanction or pressure North Korea that an alternative door is left open, in other words being proactive to advance dialogue, even as we join in condemning nuclear and missile tests. Ensuring that North Korea does not find itself without recourse to a non-violent strategy is in everyone’s interest, most of all the US’.

The prospect of missiles flying across the Pacific has opened, yet again, the debate over joining the US’ ballistic missile defence (BMD) system, this as much for the prospect of intercepting missiles directed or misdirected towards Canada as for bolstering our North American alliance status. This option, previously rejected by PM Harper, does not appear to have traction with the Trudeau government, despite suggestions that the US disavows formal responsibility to extend protection to Canada.

*The long game:* The scenarios for the future certainly are contingent on whether or not conflict breaks out. With conflict will come security, economic, and political crises of monumental proportion – in essence necessitating a remaking of the regional order. While the non-conflict path will avoid the immediacy of chaos and humanitarian disaster, both scenarios pose the prospect of creating the institutions and mechanisms to manage North Korea's integration into the regional and international economic and political system and to the establishment of stability on the Peninsula. There is much to be done at both regional and systemic levels; Canada can lend its support and assume responsibilities in numerous ways in this daunting agenda. Opening of dialogue and vetting of possibilities needs to commence now.

Kevin Rudd (former Australian PM) and William Perry (former US Secretary of Defence) have taken a lead worth following in sketching the outlines a future regional order. Its essential parameters would have to include: a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War, preparation for North Korean entrance into the global financial and trade systems, a stable plan for the Korean Peninsula covering positioning of forces, controlled denuclearization, and critically, a security guarantee for the North Korean regime, supported by the US and China (possibly also others).

*Finally*, one cannot ignore the looming prospect of failure, i.e., one side or the other strikes out and a conflict ensues, on the Peninsula but also perhaps in other sites, such as threatened by Kim Jung Un. Without consideration of fault, the aftermath of any attack on a civilian centre will be a humanitarian crisis that can only be addressed through coordinated international response. Ottawa needs to evaluate how it can and will respond to a multi-dimensional crisis that could extend beyond the scale of any recent natural or human disaster.