FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 07.09.2017 | Frederick Carriere

How to avoid war with North Korea

Why the 'military option' is not really an option at all

In an address on 15 August marking Liberation Day, the 72nd anniversary of the end of Japan's colonial occupation of Korea, President Moon Jae-in of South Korea declared there would never be another war on the Korean Peninsula. In doing so, he made clear South Korea's opposition to the recent 'war of words' between the United States and North Korea. Moon drove his point home, saying: '[M]ilitary action on the Korean Peninsula is a course of action that can be decided by South Korea alone, and no one can decide to take military action without the consent of South Korea'.

His statement was a direct response to US President Donald Trump, who had threatened to rain down 'fire and fury' on North Korea. By contrast, Moon's remarks on North Korea in his Liberation Day address were focused primarily on the need for more dialogue, a point he had underscored previously in his Berlin Declaration in early July. In a press conference held just two days after Liberation Day, however, Moon issued a controversial threat of his own, warning North Korea not to cross a 'red line' by launching another intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) or weaponising it with a nuclear warhead.

What does this newfound assertiveness by South Korea signal to both its northern neighbour and the United States?

In asserting his country's sovereign authority over the initiation and use of military force on the Korean Peninsula, the South Korean president effectively zeroed out any chance of the United States choosing, of its own volition, to launch a pre-emptive strike on North Korea. Including North Korea in this assertion – implicit in Moon's 'red-line' declaration – was controversial because it implies a claim to authority that's contested. The prevention of war on the Korean Peninsula is of mutual interest to both Koreas, but their unresolved competition for national legitimacy – as reflected in their conflicting mutual claims to the entire Korean Peninsula – makes the exercise of sovereign authority over the use of military force a moot point, especially when it pertains to the United States.

No military solution

Despite the US' mantra-like assertion that 'all options are on the table', there has been virtually no danger of the US launching an actual pre-emptive strike on North Korea since the mid-1990s. As Steve Bannon, Donald Trump's ousted chief strategist, put it in a recent unguarded interview: 'There's no military solution [to North Korea's nuclear threats], forget it. Until somebody solves the part of the equation that shows me that ten million people in Seoul don't die in the first 30 minutes from conventional weapons, I don't know what you're talking about, there's no military solution here, they got us.'

Bannon's undercutting of Trump's 'fire and fury' bluff probably expedited his removal from the White House staff.

What Moon's Liberation Day declaration effectively accomplished, then, was to strip away any pretence that a 'military option' exists as a last resort for the United States in resolving the standoff with North Korea. There now is greater pressure on both the US and South Korea to find better ways of negotiating with the North, without resorting to war-like rhetoric.

Dialling down the level of coercion by effectively taking the military option off the table will make it easier to reach a negotiated settlement.

Less posturing, more talk

As an initial sign of a tactical adjustment of this kind, the number of US personnel participating in the joint military exercises that got underway on 21 August was scaled back significantly. Likewise, there was less media hype in South Korea surrounding this year's exercises. Despite its predictable fire and brimstone protests, the hope was North Korea would see these changes as a conciliatory gesture in response to its oft-stated, longstanding security concerns. Initially, it appeared these modest gestures might be paving the way for negotiations. However, reality quickly overtook perception when North Korea launched another ICBM that provocatively overflew Japan. Then it conducted its sixth, largest-ever nuclear test. The ICBM was launched on the date of Japan's colonial annexation of Korea in 1910, which is a typical signal of the historical grievances fuelling North Korea's 'provocations' toward both the United States and Japan.

Nuclear and missile programmes give North

These latest developments clarify North Korea's resolute commitment to complete its nuclear and missile deterrence. From this perspective,

Korea an enhanced sense of security.

the assertion of a national security prerogative by South Korea is meaningless as a protection against a pre-emptive military strike by the United States. At the same time, though, North Korea is well aware of the interim nature of this solution to its security dilemma. It knows too well the fundamental limitations of its deterrence in removing the obstacles to normalised relations with the United States. Nuclear and missile programmes give North Korea an enhanced sense of security. However, they also enable the United States to spearhead the passage of ever more draconian resolutions and economic sanctions on North Korea in the United Nations Security Council. North Korea will not be able to sustain this pressure in the long run.

The South as mediator

Despite the inevitable disappointment felt after North Korea's latest missile test on 29 August, South Korea must patiently continue to foster peace on the peninsula through engagement. It needs to reverse the antagonistic strategy of the preceding administration. Instead of undercutting North Korea's relations with the international community, South Korea should demonstrate its intention – and unique capacity within the permissible scope of existing UN sanctions – to be helpful to North Korea in normalising its international relations overall, and with the United States in particular. The pursuit of this policy is in line with the understanding of the pathway to reconciliation and eventual national reunification enshrined in every inter-Korean agreement. Beginning with the North-South Joint Communique of 4 July, 1972, it is acknowledged in these agreements that realising a peaceful, prosperous and ultimately reunified Korean Peninsula depends on non-violent North-South cooperation with 'no reliance on external forces or interference'.

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This core component of all inter-Korean agreements underscores the delicacy of the challenge facing the Moon administration in implementing its pro-engagement agenda. There is a potentially explosive implication that inter-Korean bonding can only occur at the expense of South Korea's alliance relationship with the United States. To achieve his administration's objectives, then, Moon must

find a way to strike a balance between affirming the alliance and implementing the inter-Korean commitments. Neither is fungible and that's the rub.

How can South Korea make good on inter-Korean commitments while also complying with its obligations to support sanctions against North Korea? These sanctions seem to preclude collaboration on any economic, logistical or other developmental projects. Until a solution to this dilemma is found, North-South relations will remain in the doldrums. Offers of humanitarian assistance or proposals for cultural and sporting exchanges alone cannot change the prevailing winds. North Korea made its position crystal clear when it rejected all the proposals put forward by the Moon administration. Hence the path to peace and mutual prosperity on the Korean Peninsula is effectively blocked for the foreseeable future.

Paradoxical as it may seem, North Korea has been confronting a parallel dilemma in its dealings with the United States. Kim Yong Sun, who in 1992 was the first North Korean official to meet with a senior American official since the Korean War, characterised his country's relations with the United States with the epithet 'No forever enemies, no forever friends'. This amounts to a truncated version of the classic dictum of Lord Palmerston, the 19th century prime minister and foreign secretary of Great Britain: 'Nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests'. It's also a Korean saying with deep historical roots.

'No forever enemies, no forever friends'

Meanwhile, it is unclear how the US-South Korea alliance will be adjusted to accommodate the changing geopolitical conditions in Northeast Asia, at a juncture when the United States under Trump no longer sees itself as 'the world's policeman' and only wants to engage where it benefits the US directly. On the other hand, compared with previous US administrations with more 'traditional' foreign policy positions, the Trump administration ultimately may turn out to be more open to an outcome on the Korean Peninsula that is negotiated by Koreans themselves. In fact, advocates of a 'traditional' foreign policy approach to North Korea are worried about the possibility that Trump will make the 'mistake' of 'extending an open hand to Pyongyang and

proposing a new set of diplomatic negotiations'.

Most of the North-South initiatives included in inter-Korean agreements, especially those negotiated during the 2000 and 2007 summit meetings, have become subject to restrictions imposed by UN sanctions. Many of these initiatives are not prohibited altogether, however, and can be pursued provided certain checks or restrictions are in place. Additionally, all the measures imposed by UN sanctions – as is stated in paragraph 26 of Resolution 2371, the latest set of sanctions adopted on 5 August 2017 – 'are not intended to have adverse humanitarian consequences for the civilian population of the DPRK or to affect negatively or restrict those activities, including economic activities and cooperation, food aid and humanitarian assistance'.

The sanctions dilemma

The burning question is whether or not the Moon administration can find a way to sound the same clarion call on the objective of the sanctions on North Korea as it did on the issue of a pre-emptive military strike. After all, as Russia's UN Ambassador Vassily Nebenzia has stressed, sanctions ‘need to be a tool for engaging the country in constructive talks’ and must not be used for the country’s 'economic asphyxiation'. This position has been articulated routinely by China. It is not a distinction the United States seems to recognise as consistent with its policy of 'maximum pressure'. One potentially viable approach would be to link North-South talks on economic cooperation to US-North Korea talks on the nuclear and missile programmes. These talks should proceed concurrently as two parallel tracks.

Just as there is no compelling reason to anticipate the outbreak of war on the Korean Peninsula in the present circumstances, despite sombre warnings from some breathless pundits, it also is naïve to expect peace to be achieved there in the near future. Undeniably, however, the approach taken to North Korea by the previous two presidential administrations, both in the US and in South Korea, has exacerbated, rather than alleviated, the threat of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programmes. While it may be fair commentary to observe how 'presidential whim has replaced foreign policy' in the Trump administration so far, lately there also have been welcome signs of a preference for diplomatic engagement. Once the bravura of the strategy of 'maximum pressure' has died down, the Moon administration’s strategy of offering 'an outstretched hand to the North Koreans first, in the hope of reducing tensions with the promise of economic integration' may finally be recognised as a multilateral solution to a perennial foreign policy challenge that demands an enhanced awareness of the world as others see it.



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