

## US close to decision on N Korea

Written by John Bolton

Saturday, 18 November 2017 05:48

---

Substantively, US President Donald Trump's trip to Asia made important progress against North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs. However, in this long counter-proliferation struggle, it remains unclear whether China has been persuaded to exert its unequalled ability to dictate events in the North, or whether it is still engaging in equivocation, misdirection and subterfuge.

Trump scored significant advances for his policies in Japan and South Korea, although Seoul's resolve is still uncertain. In Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe underscored his agreement with Trump's view that military force might be necessary to stop Pyongyang.

Abe's early political career skyrocketed because he advocated tough measures against North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's father, Kim Jong-il, for kidnapping Japanese civilians. Abe knows well the deep concerns about Pyongyang among Japan's vulnerable population.

Trump had a more difficult task in South Korea, where the electorate is deeply split. South Korean President Moon Jae-in adheres to a version of the "sunshine policy," believing that the North can be cajoled out of its belligerence, a theory yet to produce even the slightest alteration in Pyongyang's push for nuclear weapons.

By contrast, after the North's sixth nuclear test in September, Liberty Korea Party leader Hong Jun-pyo called on Washington to return tactical nuclear weapons to the peninsula once again, a move even South Korean Minister of National Defense Song Young-moo suggested be discussed.

One poll conducted before the latest test found that 68 percent of South Korea's population favored redeploying tactical nuclear weapons.

Trump's speech to the South Korean National Assembly, the first by a US president since 1993, was impressive. He made clear that he would do what was necessary to protect the US.

## US close to decision on N Korea

Written by John Bolton

Saturday, 18 November 2017 05:48

---

“Do not underestimate us and do not try us,” Trump said. “We will not allow American cities to be threatened with destruction. We will not be intimidated.”

However, Trump also reaffirmed the importance of the alliance between the US and South Korea, thereby denying Kim Jong-un the opportunity, at least for now, to drive a wedge between the allies.

Unfortunately, it might be Beijing, not Pyongyang, that is opening daylight between the Moon and Trump administrations.

Just days before Trump's arrival, China and South Korea resolved an increasingly contentious dispute: China ended trade restrictions and South Korea agreed not to deploy more Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense missile systems or join with Japan and the US in trilateral missile defense cooperation or a defense alliance.

Many South Koreans profoundly disagree with the deal, but Moon, who has long held such views, might hope it will constrain future Seoul governments.

Beijing was the main event of Trump's trip, but here the results are unclear. It could not have escaped Chinese President Xi Jinping's (习近平) attention that Trump arrived after successful consultations in Seoul and Tokyo. Xi, having just consolidated his domestic political power at the Chinese Communist Party's 19th National Congress, was clearly positioned to handle the North Korea issue as he saw fit.

However, apart from Trump's brief comments about Xi promising more help on sanctions, we do not know what else was agreed, if anything. It is possible there was progress, which neither party thought opportune to disclose publicly. It is just as possible there was no progress at all.

During China's grinding war with Japan and the contemporaneous Communist-Nationalist civil war, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai (周恩来) formulated a strategy known as da da tan tan (打打谈谈, “fight fight talk talk”). Xi might be following a variation of this strategy (perhaps coordinated with North Korea, perhaps not), using endless consultations to buy time to stall US military action

against the North's nuclear program.

CIA Director Mike Pompeo last month said that Pyongyang was within months of being able to hit targets across the US, the most pessimistic assessment about its capabilities ever made.

Even if North Korea is less advanced, it is undoubtedly almost across the finish line of a 25-year race. With just a little more time, Kim Jong-un could effectively immunize his nuclear and ballistic missile programs from a US strike because of the risk that he could retaliate with nuclear weapons.

With time having nearly run out, more rhetoric from China, similar to the past several decades, is simply unacceptable. China must use its unique economic leverage over North Korea now, either facilitating a controlled collapse of Kim's regime to reunify the peninsula under an extended South Korean model, or replacing Kim with a new government that can unquestionably be made to hand over the nuclear weapons program.

Although fraught with difficulties, this approach is now actually the "easy way" for China to achieve what it has said for decades is its policy, namely eliminating Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program.

The hard way is to stand by while the US uses military force to destroy that program before North Korea has the capacity to retaliate, also a risky strategy, especially for South Korea. However, the US' failure to act effectively over 25 years and three presidents has brought us to this unhappy point, as was acknowledged in an opinion piece by former US national security adviser Susan Rice.

If North Korea achieves deliverable nuclear weapons, it will be able to extort and coerce the US, Japan, South Korea and others, not to mention opening a vast emporium of nuclear technology for the likes of Iran, other aspiring nuclear weapons states and even terrorist groups. Arguments that Pyongyang can be contained and deterred as the Soviet Union once was are frank invitations to a new system of international terror, under terms and conditions far different from the Cold War.

## US close to decision on N Korea

Written by John Bolton

Saturday, 18 November 2017 05:48

---

Indeed, the likelihood of an increasingly multipolar nuclear weapons environment, a scenario we have never before experienced, should alone be enough to demonstrate that denuclearization of North Korea is truly the only way forward, as Trump told the UN General Assembly in September.

Make no mistake, we are very close to a decision whether North Korea's threat will be handled the easy way or the hard way. Trump's Asia trip may well prove to be the hinge point.

*John Bolton served as US ambassador to the UN and as undersecretary for arms control and international security affairs at the US Department of State under then-US president George W. Bush. He is now a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.*

Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2017/11/18](#)