

Let's Get Real About the Korean Nuclear Problem

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It is time to get real about the Korean Peninsula's nuclear problem. For too long, the problem has been viewed through the prism of Christian morality. Since the Korean War, the United States and its allies have clung to the Cold War dichotomy between "good" non-communist and "bad" communist nations. We eventually made peace with China and Vietnam, although both remain authoritarian, communist states. On the Korean Peninsula, the myth of a "good" non-communist South and "bad" communist North persists. It remains the bed rock for the massive conventional and nuclear US military presence in Northeast. But now South Korea is part of the problem.

Seoul's admission of "small" nuclear indiscretions since 1982, after its 1978 promise to stop nuclear weapons development, confirms that national interests drive South Korea's security policy, just as it does North Korea and all other nations. Loyalty to allies and commitments to international treaties are considerations, but they are not the decisive ones. Security comes first.

The two Koreas share a second decisive factor – distrust of big powers, particularly the United States. Koreans' common historical legacy taught them in the 19th Century not to trust a collapsing China and an expanding Japan. Koreans transferred their distrust to other "big powers" in the 20th Century. The World War II Allies in 1943 promised Korea independence "in due course," but in 1945 the Soviet Union and the United States divided Korea, then each occupied half of it. The Korean War compelled Koreans to turn to separate superpowers for survival.

The Cold War's end intensified Koreans' sense of insecurity and distrust. North Korea's benefactor collapsed, and with it the Soviet nuclear umbrella. This nurtured an appetite for a "self reliant" defense posture that included a "nuclear deterrence capability." South Korea remained under the US umbrella. Its strategist, however, saw US Congressional grumbling about Seoul's authoritarian government as a threat to the US defense commitment. Seoul reached the same conclusion as Pyongyang – develop a self reliant defense posture and, if needed, a nuclear deterrence capability.

Today, the two Koreas distrust the US for opposite reasons. North Korea sees the United States as its worst enemy while South Korea fears that the US will abandon it. Washington's recent redeployment of infantry units to Iraq is latest in a series of troop reductions dating from the Vietnam War. Each time the United States has considered or withdrawn troops, South Korea has quickened progress toward a "self reliant" defense and resumed nuclear weapons related experiments.

We need a realistic solution to the Korean nuclear problem. It must be rooted in diplomacy which, by definition, requires negotiations and concessions on both sides. The

United States, Japan, China and Russia should band together to present both Koreas a two phase package deal. First, give them comprehensive security assurances. Require only that they recognize that no foreign power will intervene in any way if they engage in hostilities with each other. Next, the powers would present a joint “Marshall Plan” designed to revive North Korea’s economy and link it to South Korea’s economy. But first, both Koreas must give up their nuclear weapons development programs and all related equipment and facilities, accept comprehensive inspections, and initiate conventional arms reduction talks. Disbursement of economic funds would be linked to progress on the disarmament front.

After all, the two Koreas want exactly what we want – peace, prosperity and stability on the Korean Peninsula. The absence of one threatens the others. Obviously, North Korea needs prosperity.

Conditions in North Korea today have improved since 2000. When I visited Pyongyang in August, the lights were on and the air conditioner hummed around the clock. Restaurants were open and ample portions of food were served. Children played noisily in parks. Cars, bicycles and new double decker busses filled Pyongyang’s streets. Flower pots and jars of pickled vegetables had replaced corn stalks, tomato plants and cackling chickens. In the country side, people weeded lush green rice paddies and tall fields of corn. Oxen, goats, chickens and geese were everywhere. Scantly dressed and clearly healthy children slashed in streams and lakes.

But the appearance of plenty is an illusion. It is a consequence of nature’s compassion and the government’s coercive diplomacy which consists of “give me what I need or I will do something disruptive.” North Korea’s leadership still must be convinced to earn international respect and hard currency through good conduct and adroit trade. Only then can it pay for its needs. Otherwise, nature or war will again wreck havoc on the Korean Peninsula.