

North Korea: there is only one acceptable endgame

By Michael Pembroke

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It is a truism that there is nothing much to like about North Korea. It is harsh, authoritarian, repressive and secretive. And its economic structural problems are largely of its own making - a direct result of the huge expenditure on its "military first" policy, its socialist economic principles and the greed, graft and moral obloquy of the ruling elite. But there has never been a popular uprising and the regime is likely to continue. And China has a vital interest in its ongoing survival.

As with Mark Twain's death, predictions of North Korea's imminent collapse are misplaced. Such imaginings tend to be the preserve of enthusiasts in the Pentagon and the State Department; the same ones who insist foolishly that Kim Jong-un is irrational; who refuse to deal with Pyongyang, hoping for collapse.

The United States has told an emergency UN Security Council meeting that it's ready to use force "if we must" to stop North Korea's nuclear missile program

The geopolitical reality is that North Korea is committed to being a nuclear state. At some point in the not too distant future, it will miniaturise nuclear warheads on intercontinental ballistic missiles. Refusing to engage with it will not make that prospect go away. Washington's policy of non-engagement serves only to maximise the fear, antagonism and pugnaciousness that have characterised North Korean policy for years. The Pentagon's frequently expressed mantra that it will not reward bad behaviour is unwise. China's recent criticism was pointed. It counselled the United States that by not talking to Pyongyang "you will only drive them in the wrong direction", and that a policy of non-engagement is "only making things worse".

Now China and Russia are taking matters into their own hands, jointly proposing a sensible way forward in North Korea - while Washington appears determined to remain locked in its unresolved 70-year-old war with North Korea. The ground is shifting in Northeast Asia. China and Russia are gradually forming a military semi-alliance in the region. Both countries are united in their desire to check American expansion in the Asia-Pacific. Since 2012, their navies have held regular joint exercises in the East China Sea, the Sea of Japan and the South China Sea. And last year, the Chinese and Russian

foreign ministers issued a joint statement objecting to American intrusion in the dispute between China and the Philippines over territorial claims in the South China Sea - on the ground that the US was not a littoral state. There is a perception of American hypocrisy on the South China Sea issue. Washington has not ratified the very treaty - the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea - to which it demands China adhere.



Illustration: Dionne Gain

But the perception of hypocrisy is worse when it comes to the Korean peninsula. Nothing is clearer, yet more misunderstood, than the abiding fear, paranoia and siege mentality that drives Pyongyang. The war resulted in incomparable devastation and civilian tragedy north of the 38th parallel. Most of North Korea was levelled, systematically bombed town by town. In the rebuilt streets of Pyongyang, the legacy is bitterness. And the war has not ended. There has been no peace treaty between states, merely an armistice between military commanders.

North Korea feels threatened and has done so for nearly seven decades. Pyongyang regards its nuclear and missile program as an important deterrent to external aggression and a security guarantee for the regime's survival. It is a response to the American military presence in the region, not the cause of it. That military presence is substantial - approximately 83 American military bases or installations in South Korea; over 100 in Japan, mostly on Okinawa; and more than 40 on tiny Guam, which is about the size of Rhode Island. China understands North Korea's predicament. It thinks America's "hostile policy is to blame for North Korea's weapons program".

And Pyongyang's resolve is only strengthened by its perception of American hypocrisy. While the US professes to desire a world without nuclear weapons and demands a denuclearised Korean peninsula, its own conduct hardly gives cause for confidence. Only a few years after the armistice in 1953, it unilaterally abrogated the treaty by introducing nuclear weapons to the

peninsula. In 2001, under President Bush, it withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. And in 2016-17, it actively opposed, and lobbied its allies to oppose, a ground-breaking United Nations resolution for multilateral negotiations designed to achieve a worldwide nuclear ban treaty.

The Pyongyang regime knows that the US has a stockpile of between 4000 to 7000 nuclear warheads; that over a thousand are actively deployed on ballistic missiles, nuclear submarines and at airbases such as Guam; and that some are almost certainly targeted at Pyongyang. The country lives with a constant fear of invasion, subjugation and occupation - for which the population braces every spring when the US military conducts its annual joint exercises in the seas around the Korean peninsula. And secret planning for conflict with North Korea is constantly under review in Washington.

There is only one acceptable endgame. Pyongyang wants engagement and respect; it wants regime security and state survival; and it wants a peace treaty to end the 70-year war and remove the threat to its existence. Strange as it may seem, its provocations are an invitation to negotiate. It wants to talk to the world and it wants to deal directly with the US. Until now, the dominant military mindset in Washington has remained unshakeable. But China and Russia may prompt a rethink. There is much that the US could put on the table in return for a denuclearised Korean peninsula - the annual provocative war games, a peace treaty to end the war and the removal of its military bases in South Korea.

Michael Pembroke travelled to North Korea in 2016. His forthcoming book on the history of the peninsula will be released early next year. Its working title is *American Eagle - Korea's Tragedy*.