

The need for a new U.S. foreign policy toward Korea

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United States-North Korean relations remain tense, with the Trump administration threatening to launch a first-strike military attack to destroy North Korea's nuclear infrastructure. And North Korea for its part has said it would respond to any attack with its own strikes against US bases in the region and even the US itself.

This is not good, but it is important to realize that what is happening now is not new. The US began conducting yearly war games with South Korean forces in 1976 and it was not long before those included simulated nuclear attacks against North Korea, and that was before the country had any nuclear weapons.

The high cost of belligerency

Although I don't believe either side wants a new Korean war, the cycle of belligerency and threats is intensifying. And it is always possible that miscalculation could trigger war. Moreover, and this is very important, even if war is averted, the heightened state of tension has high costs.

President Trump is continuing the Obama administration strategy of responding to every North Korean missile launch or nuclear test with new sanctions. These sanctions cut deep, seriously hurting North Korean living conditions. It is collective punishment of the entire North Korean population.

For example, U.S. initiated UN resolutions passed in August and September call for blocking North Korea from exporting coal, iron, iron ore, lead, lead ore, seafood and textiles, the country's most important exports. They also impose a cap on the amount of oil and natural gas North Korea is allowed to import, and ban countries from opening new or expanding existing joint ventures with the DPRK.

But North Koreans are not the only ones to suffer. The escalation of tensions also fuels military spending at the cost of needed social programs in Japan, China, South Korea and the U.S. And in South Korea, tensions have already been at work undermining democratic possibilities, as labor leaders have been jailed, civil rights curtailed, and progressive political parties disbanded in the name of national security.

So, it is not enough for us to just work to oppose outright military conflict. We need to change the dynamics driving U.S.-North Korean relations. And doing that requires changing U.S. foreign policy towards North Korea.

We have another option

The U.S. government and mainstream media claim that we have no choice but to follow our present policy of aggression towards the North. But that is not true – we have another option. It is to accept the repeated offers by North Korea to engage in direct negotiations with all issues on the table, those of concern to them and those of concern to the US government.

This option is always dismissed as out of hand, usually for one of the following three



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reasons: North Korea is a closed country, unwilling to engage with other countries; it is ruled by crazy people hell-bent on war; and its leaders cannot be trusted to follow through on their promises.

But none of these reasons hold true.

North Korea is indeed willing to engage other countries. Most importantly, it has been asking for direct talks with the U.S. since the early 1990s. The reason is simple: this is when the USSR ended and Russia and its central European allies adopted capitalism. North Korea was dependent on trade with these countries and their change left its economy devastated. North Korean leaders realized that they had no choice but to take steps to reconnect their economy with international markets and that required ending the state of hostilities with US and its embargo.

Thus, North Korea has repeatedly asked for talks with the U.S. to end the Korean War and normalize relations. Up until 2013 the country offered, for its part, to abandon its missile program and nuclear weapons. But the U.S. rejected the offers. While North Korea has stated that it is no longer willing to give up its existing missiles and nuclear weapons, it has offered to stop testing and producing new ones if the U.S. would only cancel its yearly war games. But the U.S. has refused this offer as well.

North Korea has also tried to join the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, but the U.S. and Japan have kept them out. The North has tried to set up free-trade zones to attract foreign investment, but the U.S. and Japan have worked to block any investment.

So – it is not the North refusing to talk, it is the U.S. It is not the North that is refusing to engage with the global economy, it is the United States blocking them.

The North Korean leadership is not

hell-bent on war. North Korea as portrayed as a militarily aggressive country. What the media rarely mentions is that South Korea has outspent North Korea on the military every year since 1976. South Korean annual military spending is approximately \$40 billion, and this doesn't include U.S. spending. North Korea's spending, by contrast, is only \$4 billion.

As for the nuclear threat, it was the U.S. that threatened to use nuclear bombs on North Korea during the Korean War and introduced nuclear weapons onto the Korean peninsula in 1958 in violation of the Korean War armistice. And it was the U.S. that has threatened nuclear attack on North Korea as part of its war games long before the North had nuclear weapons. The fact is that North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons development has largely been in response to escalating US threats.

North Korea has also been a far more reliable negotiating partner than the United States. Here we have to take up the nuclear weapons issue more directly. North Korea has tested a nuclear weapon 6 times: 2006, 2009, 2013, twice in 2016, and in September of this year.

North Korea was first accused of developing nuclear weapons in the early 1990s. It refused to confirm or deny their existence but said it would show its hand if the U.S. would enter talks to normalize relations. Its interest was driven by the collapse of the USSR, and it hoped the talks would lead to an end to hostilities between the two countries.

However, the U.S. refused the offer, and began to mobilize for a strike on North Korean nuclear facilities. War was averted only because Jimmy Carter went to North Korea, against the wishes of the Clinton administration, and negotiated what is known as the Framework Agreement with Kim Il Sung. The agreement called on North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program in exchange for energy aid, the promised construction of two light water nuclear reactors, and normalization of relations. From 1994 to 2002 the North froze its plutonium program and allowed international inspectors to monitor its nuclear fuel to ensure that it could not be used for bomb-making.

Unfortunately, while North Korea followed the agreement, the U.S. did not. It did not maintain regular deliveries of fuel, did not build the new reactors, and took only limited steps to normalize relations. And it was the U.S. that actually terminated the agreement.

In 2001 the Bush administration signaled its displeasure with improving South Korea-North Korea relations. In 2002 it declared the North as part of the "axis of evil," advanced the Bush doctrine justifying a first strike on North Korea, and then unilaterally canceled the 1994 agreement. In response, the North Korean leadership ordered the inspectors out and restarted its nuclear program.

China, fearing the possibility of a new Korean War, organized six-party talks that included the U.S., North Korea, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and China. Finally, in 2005, the U.S., pressured by the other countries, signed a new agreement that was much like the Framework Agreement. But the day before the new agreement was made public, the Bush administration sabotaged it, accusing North Korea of counterfeiting \$100 bills. Since 1989 some \$50 million of fake bills had circulated outside the US. At the time the U.S. blamed Iran. But now the U.S. said it was North Korea, and it used that claim to put a financial embargo on the country.

And so, North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in 2006. And the U.S. quickly agreed to drop the matter, end the financial embargo, and comply with the new agreement.

In 2007, North Korea shut down its nuclear program and even began dismantling facilities in exchange for aid. In 2008 it provided a massive report on its past nuclear activities, also as required by the agreement. But the U.S. again did not follow through on its commitments. It continued to be late with aid and delayed ending sanctions. In fact, it made new demands. Condoleezza Rice, then secretary of state, publicly admitted that the U.S. was unilaterally changing the terms of the agreement, demanding highly intrusive access to all North Korean military facilities before it would meet its obligations. Frustrated, North Korea ended its compliance and in 2009 tested another nuclear weapon.

Tragically, little has changed. The U.S. continues to ratchet up the pressure on North Korea, with war games and sanctions, hoping it will collapse. North Korea, for its part, meets this pressure by developing new missiles and nuclear weapons and issuing its own threats.

We can choose peace

Here is what the above history shows: whenever the U.S. is willing to negotiate, North Korea responds. It has been the U.S. that has regularly undermined the possibility for improving relations and achieving peace on the Korean peninsula. Said differently, we can stop this spiraling danger of war – all we have to do is get the U.S. government to sit down and engage in direct negotiations with a willing negotiating partner. Unfortunately, history also makes it clear that this will only happen if we collectively speak up and demand an end to the madness.

