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A “Modest Proposal” To End The North Korean Nuclear Crisis: Trump Should Threaten Beijing With A Nuclearized Taiwan

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As the North Korean nuclear crisis escalates, the media is filled with an endless rehashing of the old inutile options. Typically articles in *Globe and Mail* and others will restate all the traditional options from multilateral diplomacy to tougher sanctions to unilateral US military action but then recount the long acknowledged problems with each option.

This paper suggests a simple but revolutionary diplomatic move. It agrees with the many commentators who have said that China is the only actor with the leverage to effectively halt or even roll back Pyongyang’s nuclear and missile program (or even to attempt regime change.) But unlike some of these analyses, I will argue that so far China has not had sufficient motivation to fully exercise its leverage on North Korea. Therefore the key is to develop a threat plausible enough to provide that motivation. If the US is to face a nuclear deterrent from North Korea, then China should face a similar deterrent and threat from Taiwan.

North Korea’s strategy: the small power’s nuclear veto option

Nuclear weapons are the ultimate power equalizer, in some ways better suited for small states facing big threats. This logic justified the creation of a separate (from Nato and the US umbrella) French nuclear force in the 1960s with De Gaulle’s “Force de frappe” threatening just enough destruction to deter a Soviet attack on France. The French saw it as the ultimate “veto” on threats to national sovereignty from larger states.

In Asia, both Taiwan and South Korea fit the bill to develop a small nuclear counter force and, not surprisingly, both are alleged to have tried. In the 1970s both the Park regime in Seoul and the Jiang regime in Taipei began clandestine nuclear weapons research programs. And in both cases, the US government applied pressure to halt its ally’s attempt at nuclear security. In both cases, China was indirectly a major beneficiary of the US clampdown. This history provides a precedent and a reciprocity-based argument for the US demanding that China now take similar action with its ally.

The French pioneered the strategic argument behind this weak-to-strong deterrence (*dissuasion du faible au fort*.) Unlike the standard superpower Mutually Assured Destruction argument's emphasis on arms races and roughly balanced forces, the weak-to-strong deterrence position justifies smaller states acquiring a small force capable of inflicting just enough destruction to make the larger think twice about attacking. This is done through a "countervalue" posture, targeting major cities to "hold hostage" a large number of the enemy's civilian population. The effectiveness of this strategy can be seen in the way North Korea, using until recently only conventional forces, has held Seoul as hostage, preventing US military action. But in the long-term, given doubts about US commitments to distant allies, Pyongyang has deemed it much better to have American cities (Honolulu, Seattle, etc.) as hostages with long-range nuclear missiles.

China's Motivations and the limitations of US diplomatic efforts

The key regional player, China, has received an amazingly free-ride in the public debate and Western media on this subject. In part this uncritical attitude arises from an erratic Trump presidency enabling President Xi Jinping to play the "honest broker" role of the "only adult in the room," a circumstance which China has seized with relish as it enhances its rising global prestige. Thus we are told China seeks only stability in the region and frets about the wave of North Korean immigrants that would result from a sudden collapse of the current regime. Slightly more realistic commentators might go further and admit Chinese concerns about an East German model collapse where West Germany and Nato in effect absorbed the former communist state on its own terms. In this scenario, South Korea absorbing the North would bring its ally, the US, to the Yalu river (China's border) but this again is usually presented as an understandable defensive Chinese concern.

Forgotten is the normal Great Power Rivalry analysis, which focussing on China's long-term strategic interest in weakening its main competitors, Japan and the US, shows the underlying de facto shared interests of Pyongyang and Beijing. North Korea's missiles are aimed at Japan and the US, not China (or Russia.) Thus, in effect, it serves as China's Madman or mad "dog" in the sense that Mao's wife Jiang Ching described the role,¹ though with "plausible deniability" as to ownership or responsibility. This is demonstrated again recently in Beijing's denial to the Trump administration of any leverage over its ally.

Thus to Pyongyang's "Bad Cop," Beijing can play "Good Cop" suggesting moderation and diplomacy. But what is the content of China's moderating diplomatic proposals? They (and the Russians) suggest the US begin with a freeze on its annual joint military exercises in exchange merely for another "freeze" on Pyongyang's missile tests. But this of course opens the door to a series of further concessions the US could make to wind down its military presence and commitment to its South

¹ During the trial of the Gang of Four, the Communist Party attempted to scapegoat Mao's widow and distance the Chairman from the radical excesses of the Cultural Revolution [plausible deniability] but she retorted that officially or not, she was Mao's attack dog, biting only those her husband wanted bit.

Korean partner with all the attendant stresses to that sometimes fragile relationship. Which brings us to the overall limitations of the US pursuing a diplomatic solution here.

Perhaps the most surprising lacuna in the current discussion of the diplomatic option is a failure to review the results of the last major diplomatic agreement, that of 1992. This omission is the more surprising given that with growing acceptance of the inevitability of a nuclear North Korea, some brave souls are now suggesting a nuclear counter-balancing and the revolutionary idea of South Korea or even Japan developing a nuclear counter deterrent. This idea is indeed revolutionary and difficult to imagine given that both are strong liberal democracies with strong pacifist or anti-nuclear domestic constituencies. Furthermore it again opens the can of worms of the troubled US military relationship - commitment, bases, shared-costs, etc. What would this introduction of new nuclear capabilities mean for reliance on the US nuclear, commitments to non-proliferation, domestic politics, etc? It would all be so much simpler if the nukes were already there.

But they were there until 1992! That's when the US agreed to remove its tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea in a major diplomatic agreement to de-nuclearize the Korean peninsula. In an apparently fair, just and symmetrical agreement, the North agreed to end development and dismantle its plutonium program with IAEA supervision in exchange for a US withdrawal of its nuclear weapons from the south (and several other large economic carrots.) However, in practice that agreement proved highly asymmetric given the ease with which Pyongyang could re-introduce nuclear weapons compared to the US and its allies. Consider how Beijing now shrieks against the introduction of a modest anti-missile defence in South Korea and imagine its reaction to the US trying merely to restore the status quo ante-1992 in tactical nuclear weapons. Thus diplomacy striped the US of a major bargaining chip, leaving only further vital asymmetric military cuts that can't help but greatly benefit the North and China at the same time. US diplomats fell victim to the classic bad-faith bargaining tactic of the ratchet, one concession after another.

Why Taiwan instead of South Korea?

There is perhaps no other people or state in the world at present that could more benefit from the "weak-to-strong deterrence" than this island. As China has made clear, at some point in the future, once it has grown the naval and air military capacity, it will reabsorb the "province" into Beijing's control with the necessary military interjection (invasion) undoubtedly triggered by an expedient "provocation." The vast majority of the island's population have shown they would resist this incursion resulting in coercion and a vast human tragedy. But if Taipei's government (somewhat mirroring Pyongyang's present situation) could counter by threatening the nuclear destruction of Xiamen, Fuzhou, and even Shanghai with simple short range nuclear missiles, Beijing would be forced to reconsider military action. Indeed a small Taiwanese nuclear force would guarantee that any future "reunion" of the island and mainland would be on the stronger moral basis of peaceful and mutually consensual means.

It seems inevitable that the people of Taiwan as well as the government are fully aware the situation and the arguments and as a result, there would be far less domestic resistance to the nuclear option than in Japan and South Korea. Beijing must also be fully aware of all the above factors and the fact that if this nuclearization were to happen now, despite its verbal threats, it might well be unable to prevent it. For Washington's perspective, it would not necessarily involve reactivating the Mutual Defence pact with Taiwan and be far cheaper and less demanding than future military commitments. As originally envisioned in the 1970s, Taipei sought a stand alone nuclear force independent of US control (and knowledge.) And it would allow the US to halt any future provocative arm sales or confrontation with Beijing over defence of the island. For Trump, it would be the ideal situation of an ally defending itself with no commitments or further costs to the US. All of which means it would be a very, very credible threat to Beijing for the purpose of forcing their compliance in de-nuclearizing North Korea. The threat initially might even be made secretly through back channels so no public "face" is lost by China.

In some ways (and this is difficult for the author to admit), Trump may be the only US leader who could pull this off. After all, he has already prepared the ground by his initial proposal to recognize (thus showing sympathy for) Taipei. Indeed an article in the Honk Kong-based *South China Morning News* has suggest a foreshadowing of this "Taiwan gambit" by suggesting Trump's generous arms sales offer to Taipei this past June was in part an attempt to pressure Beijing into more action on North Korea.² Trump is enough of a "loose cannon" to make Beijing think he would actually go further with such an unconventional nuclear option. In fact his repeated defiance of convention gives him "street-cred" for a willingness to ignore past US non-proliferation commitments and to by-pass domestic restrictions on sharing or selling nuclear technology. Given the current dismal situation with North Korea and the lack of any other plausible action, perhaps it is time for reasonable heads to consider just such a "Trumpesque" modest proposal.

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² "President Donald Trump's plan to sell US\$1.4 billion worth of weapons to Taipei is meant to put pressure on Beijing, observers say," *South China Morning Post*, PUBLISHED : Friday, 30 June, 2017, <http://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2100805/us-turns-screws-china-over-north-korea-taiwan-arms-deal>

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