Contrasting Policies Regarding North Korea & Iran

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Introduction

My career has focused on the North Korea nuclear issue for 30 years, and on Iran's for two decades. With regard to North Korea, I, like everyone else, failed. After six nuclear tests, North Korea can produce thermonuclear bombs. It can probably miniaturize the warheads and attach them to missiles that can reach as far as Florida. With regard to Iran, we have not failed – not yet anyway, although with the 2015 nuclear deal in shatters, Iran is beginning slowly to resume its march to a nuclear weapons capability.

Both North Korea and Iran can be called "outlaw states" in that each violates many international norms. They are notorious for their nuclear programs, ballistic missiles, human rights abuses, aggressive actions and detention of foreign citizens. They are thus often cast in the same category. And why not, since they have cooperated in developing ballistic missiles and possibly in sharing some nuclear data, though the evidence for this is far less conclusive.

But Iranians, seeing themselves as culturally and economically superior, dislike being grouped with the backward hermit state. And to be fair, North Korea is a far worse actor. Unlike Iran, it has developed and tested nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missiles; it has stockpiled and used chemical weapons, and it employs cybercrime as a regular tool of statecraft. While Iran has elections, however circumscribed, gender equality in many respects and religious principles, North Korea's dynastic system lacks civil rights and principles of any kind.

And yet, today, North Korea is treated far better. While both states are subject to extensive economic sanctions, North Korea has strong partners who provide a diplomatic shield and acquiesce in its sanctions-evasion techniques. Its alliances with China and Russia are less dependable than in the past, but having them on its side gives North Korea diplomatic options. Russia and China have friendly relations with Iran, and cooperate tactically, but they protect Iran to a far lesser degree.

Meanwhile, North Korea is courted by every major player with the sole exception of Japan. In the past two years, Chairman Kim Jong Un has met with the leaders of China, Russia, South Korea and the United States – three times in both of the latter two cases. I expect there will be yet another with President Donald Trump before long.

The US president excused North Korea's mid-2019 series of missile tests on grounds that they were only short-range and thus not contradictory to Kim's moratorium on intercontinental ballistic missile launches. The rest of the US government knows that those tests were a violation of UN Security Council sanctions. They also know the missiles pose a threat to US military personnel and other citizens working and living in Northeast Asia, not to mention the combined 180 million citizens of Japan and South Korea. But Trump is trying to achieve a diplomatic breakthrough with North Korea that would redound to his glory, and thus he is willing to overlook evidence which strongly suggests that Kim has no intention of giving up his nuclear arsenal.

In Singapore last year, Trump agreed to suspend large-scale US-South Korea joint military exercises, and he excused North Korea's human rights violations, among other concessions. In a post-summit press conference, he even declared his willingness to unilaterally withdraw US forces. Trump stopped describing US policy toward North Korea as one of "maximum pressure" and he treats Kim with fawning affection, even going so far as saying that they "fell in love". He was speaking metaphorically, of course, but what an odd metaphor to describe partnership with a despot.

Comparison to Recent Past

This coddling of North Korea is a new phenomenon – at least in the case of the US and South Korea. China and Russia were always willing to look the other way when North Korea broke the rules. Up until 2018, China did go along with tougher UN measures. When South Korean President Moon Jae-In and Donald Trump pursued a strategy of engagement, however, China relaxed its sanctions implementation. Japan, by contrast, has been consistently tough. But it can do little on its own. Hence, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's persistent courtship of Trump, encouraging him to remain firm. Unfortunately, this courtship has gone largely unrequited. Trump pays lip service when he meets with Abe, then often does the opposite in his interactions with Kim.

Only in Hanoi in February 2019 did Trump refuse to give in to Kim. There, both sides overplayed their hands. Kim insisted on an end to all UN sanctions, in exchange for an ambiguous offer to close down the Yongbyon nuclear center while leaving other undeclared facilities producing enriched uranium. Trump demanded complete denuclearization before the US would offer sanctions relief. He does not understand that North Korea will not unilaterally disarm. Nuclear weapons are vital to the regime's sense of self-preservation. It would

be better to pursue more limited objectives, such as verified dismantlement of all fissile material production and an end to missile tests, while maintaining the goal of denuclearization.

Tough on Iran

Meanwhile, Trump has been exceedingly tough on Iran. Calling the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement the "worst deal ever", he walked out on it in May 2018 even though Iran had been faithfully abiding by its conditions. Trump then imposed the harshest ever sanctions, which he has continued to tighten, even putting Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif on the US Treasury's black list in August 2019. Trump's claim to want negotiations with Iran is incompatible with blackballing Iran's top negotiator. I believe the real purpose of the "maximum pressure" campaign is to weaken Iran and to encourage regime change.

America's best friends are nevertheless still trying to mediate between Washington and Tehran. Abe offered to carry a message from Trump when he traveled to Iran in June. Unfortunately, the effort came to naught. Although Iran made a gesture by releasing an American resident whom it had detained, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei rebuffed Abe's effort, saying: "I do not see Trump as worthy of any message exchange, and I do not have any reply for him, now or in the future."

French President Emmanuel Macron then tried. He twice sent his top adviser to Tehran and he invited Zarif to the G-7 Summit in Biarritz, in hopes of arranging a meeting at the UN between Trump and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. But Iranians are not interested in such "photo-ops". Unlike Kim, who derives international legitimacy by sitting at the table as an equal of the US president, it would be politically dangerous for Rouhani to appear friendly to a US leader who is trying to kill the 2015 nuclear deal. Rouhani was even unable for political reasons to shake President Barack Obama's hand at the UN in 2013. After the G-7 meeting, Rouhani insisted that before there can be any positive diplomatic development, the US must first abandon its sanctions. Trump is highly unlikely to do this.

Why the Different Approaches?

There are several reasons why the US treats Iran more harshly than North Korea. One factor is psychological. Americans have not gotten over the anger and humiliation we felt when Iran seized our embassy in 1979 and held 52 US diplomats hostage for 444 days. We often forget that North Korea did something similar a decade earlier, when it seized the *USS Pueblo* spy ship, keeping its 83 crew members hostage for 11 months, even torturing them. North Korea still holds on to the *Pueblo*, using it as a propaganda museum. Yet Iran's hostage taking is more seared into our memory because the drama of it was aired daily on television news. By contrast, there were no foreign TV crews in Pyongyang to witness the humiliation of the *Pueblo*.

America's history with North Korea suggests a second reason for different treatment. Having fought an inconclusive costly war in the Korea Peninsula, the US is not inclined to do so again. Hence, it is more willing to seek diplomatic solutions. America does not want another war in the Middle East either. Yet its main partners in the region – Israel and Saudi Arabia – often appear eager for the US to deal Iran a military blow. Leaked US diplomatic cables from 2008 recounted Saudi King Abdullah's repeated call for the US to attack Iran to put an end to its nuclear weapons program. He urged Washington to "cut off the head of the snake" – meaning to overthrow the Islamic republic. In Northeast Asia, America's allies are not similarly calling for the US to attack North Korea or to remove its regime. To the contrary, they advocate peaceful diplomacy.

Actually, of late, Saudi Arabia has not been calling for the US to attack Iran, even after Trump asked what they wanted him to do, after the Sept. 14, 2019 attack on the Saudi pipeline and oil refinery. The Saudis are wary about direct military engagement with Iran. As former US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates said, the Saudis always want to "fight the Iranians to the last American".

Interestingly, Japan distanced itself from the US on this matter. While US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo expressed confidence Iran was responsible, Defense Minister Taro Kono expressed agnosticism. I have not seen the evidence, but I believe Iran had a motive: it made clear for months that if it cannot export oil, then neither should its Arab rivals. Iran does not want the Saudis to plug the oil supply gap caused by the sanctions on Iran. The US says it has high confidence about Iran's culpability. If so, the evidence should be shared with Japan and other key allies.

Thirdly, Iran's antagonism toward Israel adds to Americans' sense of grievance. Iran's call to "wipe the Zionist state off the map" should not be taken literally. It means if all Palestinians are allowed to vote, Israel could not remain Zionist. Yet such apparent calls for annihilation, sometimes expressed more luridly, evoke memories of the Holocaust and make Americans determined to protect Israel by any means. Most fervent in their protectiveness, America's large community of evangelical Christians finds common cause with Americans of Jewish faith. Combined with the 1 million-strong Iranian diaspora in the US, many of whom came when the Shah was overthrown in 1979, the anti-Islamic Republic of Iran political lobby is formidable. Neither Iran nor North Korea has any friends in the US, but Iran has more avowed enemies, many of whom are well-placed to promote policies of antipathy.

Fourthly, there are factors involving geography. The most obvious is oil; over half of the world's oil reserves are in the Middle East, and

Iran ranks fourth in the world in this regard. That makes it intrinsically more important than oil-deprived North Korea.

The other geographic factor is that South Korea's capital and one quarter of its population are within range of enemy artillery. Even before North Korea's nuclear tests, its conventional weapons held Seoul hostage. Despite repeated North Korean provocations over the years, South Korea and the US avoided a kinetic response that could have rekindled the Korean War. Now that Pyongyang has nuclear weapons, it has an even stronger means of deterring attack. In the Middle East, Iran troubles its neighbors in many ways, but it does not pose a similar existential threat. So that it can never pose such a threat, Washington is determined by any means to prevent Tehran from acquiring a nuclear weapons capability.

Defense thinkers in Japan and South Korea once thought that the US would similarly do everything necessary to block North Korea from getting nuclear weapons. Americans failed in this regard, because we and South Korea were not willing to go to war to stop the nuclear program. The cost seemed to be too high. In the Middle East, the cost of war appears to be lower.

A fifth reason for treating Iran more firmly is the nature of the threat it poses. Although North Korea is a worse actor, its bad actions are limited geographically. Iran's regional activities, including its patronage of non-state militias and promotion of a so-called "Shiite crescent", collide with US interests from Lebanon to Yemen. Because of its support for groups like Hezbollah that conduct terrorist acts, Iran is judged by the US to be the world's greatest sponsor of terrorism. By contrast, North Korea's *juche* ideology has no appeal beyond its immediate borders – and even many of the citizens within those borders surely see through the falsehood of the self-reliance slogan.

North Korea's bombing of Korean Air Flight 858 in 1987 landed the country on Washington's list of state sponsors of terrorism, but it was removed in 2008 to promote a diplomatic breakthrough and because it had not conducted more recent acts of terrorism.

There were legitimate grounds for restoring the state sponsor of terrorism designation in 2017. North Korea's use of chemical weapons to assassinate the leader's half-brother Kim Jong Nam at Kuala Lumpur airport that year was an act of terrorism by almost any definition. Why else use such a gruesome means of murder unless the purpose was to evoke terror? North Korea's cyber hack of Sony Pictures in 2014 and its cyber thefts from banks and cryptocurrency exchanges to the amount of $2 billion, according to a new UN report, also qualify as terrorism by some definitions. Failure to fully account and make amends for its abduction of citizens from Japan and other countries add to the list of grievances among concerned states. Yet, to Washington at least, North Korea is seen as a less formidable foe, a more contained threat, in comparison with Iran.

A final reason for treating the two states differently is personal. Trump is determined to outshine his predecessor Obama and to undo the latter's accomplishments. In Trump's mind, the Iran deal is bad because it was Obama's deal. And since Obama was unable to make any progress with North Korea, Trump wants to show the world that he is the one who can.

Prospective Deal with North Korea

Looking ahead, I see grounds for both optimism and cynicism. Given Trump's egocentricity and his need for a diplomatic achievement before the 2020 presidential election, I believe he will be inclined to try to strike a limited deal with North Korea. The prospects for this have improved now that John Bolton is no longer in the White House. He opposed engagement with North Korea and insisted on an all-or-nothing deal, surely knowing that North Korea will not give up its nuclear weapons entirely. The Hanoi summit thus failed.

The deal that might be possible with Pyongyang would not eliminate its nuclear weapons program, nor its missiles. And the verification measures would be limited. The deal would not address the other problems North Korea presents, including its chemical weapons, its human rights violations, its cybercrimes, its counterfeiting and its smuggling. The agreement I foresee would contain and reduce the nuclear threat to some degree. In many respects, it would resemble the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, although with fewer constraints and less detail. It would be worse than what Trump repeatedly calls "the worst deal ever".

He is wrong to say so. In light of the alternatives, and the state of the Iran nuclear program before it was stopped, the 2015 agreement was good. It blocked any potential for an Iranian nuclear weapon for a number of years and thus also obviated the likelihood of war. So, I will not prematurely cast judgement on an imperfect deal with North Korea. To quote Voltaire, we should not let the perfect be the enemy of the good.

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