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SERIOUS BUSINESS

With North Korea, Trump showing capacity for careful deliberation on a complex issue

Amid the sound and fury of President Donald Trump's first weeks in office, the new U.S. administration has been widely castigated for policy dysfunction, an insurgent view of international alliances and trade, and worrying signals about its approach to core democratic institutions.

Numerous commentators argue that the president is leading by instinct and tweet, rather than through a deliberate policy process drawing upon talented and experienced senior officials and the professional bureaucracies that support them. The growing war of words between the White House and the U.S. intelligence community looms as another major worry.

However, a very different dynamic has emerged on North Korea policy, arguably the most urgent national security challenge the administration confronts. When the president-elect met with then-president Barack Obama two days after the election, Obama warned Trump that Kim Jong Un's accelerated pursuit of nuclear weapons and missiles would preoccupy the incoming administration.

Even before assuming office, the president-elect and his team continued to discuss North Korea with Obama and outgoing senior national security officials. Trump also reportedly requested and received intelligence briefings on the

country's growing nuclear capabilities. In decided contrast to Trump campaign statements that cast doubt on U.S. security guarantees, senior officials also opened channels to their counterparts in Seoul and Tokyo and reaffirmed long-standing U.S. policy.

In early February, Trump sent Defense Secretary James Mattis to South Korea and Japan in the first overseas trip by a member of the new cabinet. Mattis offered private and public reassurances in both countries while warning Pyongyang that the American response to any nuclear provocation would be "effective and overwhelming."

China's responses to the administration's actions were somewhat contradictory. Although China continued to voice heated opposition to the U.S. decision to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense missile defense system in South Korea, there was renewed urgency in Chinese commentaries on the nuclear issue. A March 2 editorial in the Communist Party newspaper Global Times characterized the Korean Peninsula as "probably at its most dangerous time and as close to being out of control since the end of the Korean War." In remarks at the National People's Congress six days later, Foreign Minister Wang Yi likened U.S.-South Korean military exercises and North Korea's resumed missile tests to "two accelerating trains coming towards each other with neither side willing to give way."

Chinese actions however revealed a heightened awareness of the growing threat posed by North Korea and the need for a more vigorous response. Beijing's suspension of coal imports from North



TOP: U.S. President Donald Trump pauses as he talks to journalists who are members of the White House travel pool on board Air Force One during his flight to Palm Beach, Florida. BOTTOM: A South Korean TV news channel reports on North Korea's missile launches on March 6.



Korea for the remainder of 2017 will limit Pyongyang's export earnings. Beijing though was rapidly approaching the allowable annual import level permitted under a 2016 U.N. Security Council resolution, so its announcement to some extent made a virtue out of necessity.

The import restriction signaled China's recognition of the need for a coordinated strategy to impose additional costs on North Korea. It triggered unprecedented criticism of China in North Korean media, including remarks about "a neighboring country dancing to the tune of the U.S."



ENGAGEMENT WITH CHINA Meanwhile, Trump, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin sought to repair damage from the president's earlier statements questioning the U.S. "One China" policy. Before his telephone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, Trump had argued that shifting the U.S. position on Taiwan could induce Beijing to make concessions on trade issues. But openly challenging China on economic issues while insisting that Beijing undertake added measures to curb North Korea's weapons programs was contradictory and counterproductive.

Trump however has clearly recognized the potential for a severe, quite possibly profound crisis on the Korean Peninsula. With the exception of a single tweet responding to an exaggerated North Korean claim that Pyongyang can reach the continental U.S. with an intercontinental ballistic missile, he has been sober and focused. For those wondering whether the Trump White House is capable of careful deliberation over complex, high-risk security issues, the Korean Peninsula provides a welcome example. Tillerson's impending visit to Tokyo, Seoul and Beijing provides an additional opportunity to reinforce the administration's awareness of the risks and the need to deepen cooperation across the region.

None of these developments makes U.S. policy options any easier. The mid-February launch of a solid-fueled mobile intermediate range missile testified to the increasing variety and capability of Pyongyang's delivery systems. The near-simultaneous launching of four medium-range missiles on March 6, expressly designed to menace U.S. bases in Japan, underscored North Korea's increasing threat to neighboring states.

Experts continue to debate whether engagement, pressure or some combination of the two can alter North Korean behavior. Some believe that there is no alternative to "soft" regime change, combining tougher sanctions, isolation and pressure from all surrounding powers to eventually

induce a change in leadership. However, this presumes a long-term, high-risk process with no guarantee of success.

Like its immediate predecessors, the Trump administration has launched a review of policy options toward North Korea. In the aftermath of the brazen assassination of Kim Jong Nam, Kim Jong Un's half-brother at the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, measures under consideration reportedly include restoring Pyongyang to a list of state sponsors of

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terrorism, reversing its 2008 removal. Additional steps purportedly include increasing restrictions on North Korean financial and commercial activities and heightened military measures to address potential crisis contingencies.

Most of the scenarios on the Korean Peninsula range from dangerous to horrific. Trump could yet face a decision on whether to shoot down or otherwise disable a North Korean long-range missile, very possibly triggering an even larger military crisis on the peninsula. His administration also has an urgent need to fill out its ranks with senior appointments at the departments of state and defense.

All policy options on the peninsula are bad. But it is heartening that the president demonstrates a growing awareness of the risks and a recognition that cooperation with U.S. allies and with China will be essential to reducing the dangers of an acute crisis in Northeast Asia. **N**

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