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Trump's UN Speech Was a Win for North Korea

Doug Bandow
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The president created the perfect sound-clip for use at home and abroad.

Presumably President Donald Trump believed he was sticking a rhetorical dagger in North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un's heart by calling the latter "Rocket Man." But what greater compliment could there be for the leader of a small, impoverished, and isolated nation than being

recognized the U.S. president as joining the global superpower in possessing intercontinental missiles and nuclear weapons? By the president's own words Kim is now one of the "Big Boys."

President Trump also threatened to "totally destroy North Korea." In doing so he became the mirror image of the Supreme Leader of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, blustering and swaggering while spewing threats far and wide. President Trump isn't bad at the game, but the DPRK's rulers have had far more practice and are without peer. Kim can always trump Trump in this way.

What a War Between China and Japan Would Look Like.

And the president's warning had two other counterproductive effects. The first is justifying the North Korea nuclear program. Kim, like his father and grandfather, shows no signs of being suicidal: he wants his virgins in the here and now, not hereafter. His principal concern, other than maintaining domestic control, is regime preservation against U.S. pressure. Nuclear weapons are the best means to ensure that he does not suffer the fates of Saddam Hussein, Muammar el-Qaddafi, and other foreign dictators who ran afoul of Washington. Creating a nuclear deterrent is Pyongyang's preferred tool to prevent America from destroying the DPRK—at least assuming the president is as rational as the Supreme Leader.

President Trump's rhetoric also was a propaganda gift to the North. One can imagine North Koreans growing a little cynical after being lectured endlessly on the "American Threat." Now the president has created the perfect sound-clip for use at home and abroad. He didn't even bother to distinguish between the Kim dynasty and North Korean people or nation. From the DPRK's perspective, he's apparently planning on wiping out everyone and everything.

What a War Between NATO and Russia Would Look Like.

The problem is not just that there is no filter between the president's gut and mouth. He also knows little of the complexity of the Korean standoff. Thus, he imagines that all he has to do, in contrast to the calm, cool, and collected President Barack Obama—who obviously is responsible for most if not all of the world's ills—is match Kim Jong-un insult for insult. Put a little scare into the chubby if cherubic looking dictator, and the latter will rush to surrender the weapons Pyongyang has spent a quarter century or more developing.

The president can dream on. Kim, like his father and grandfather, already is scared. Which is precisely why he is developing ICBMs which are capable of striking the United States. He wants to deter American military action. He isn't going to launch a crazed suicidal attack on the United States. He's going to threaten to respond with nuclear weapons to any attack on the DPRK.

It should be obvious by now that there is no simple solution to the "North Korea Problem." The Kim dynasty is evil, but that doesn't set it apart from a parade of other dictatorships around the world. The DPRK dictator is responding to a deteriorating international-security environment and incentives created by Washington. Nukes are the surest guarantor against military intervention by today's ever-aggressive hyperpower.

What a War Between America and China Would Look Like.

If the president wants to prevent the North from developing nuclear weapons, the starting point is to recognize Pyongyang's security conundrum. The Republic of Korea has vastly outstripped the DPRK and is backed by the United States. China and Russia are at best frenemies, which would not save the North in the event of another war. Pyongyang is alone in facing overwhelming odds.

The president should drop the bluster and use rhetoric appropriate for the world's most powerful nation. Rather than issue a cavalcade of military threats which appear empty, make a serious but restrained promise of action, whether retaliation or preemption, in the few narrow circumstances which would warrant triggering the Second Korean War.

Equally if not more important, consider practical steps to demonstrate that Washington is not plotting to liquidate another member of the infamous Axis of Evil. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson assured Pyongyang that the administration had only pacific intentions, but why would Kim put any credit in such a statement? It isn't even clear that the secretary speaks for his president, let alone a future chief executive. Qaddafi was praised by Bush, feted in Europe, and encouraged by Sens. John McCain and Lindsey Graham, only to be tossed overboard by the Obama administration the moment he was vulnerable. Kim might be paranoid, but that doesn't mean he doesn't have enemies.

Steps that would suggest easing if not abandoning what the North calls Washington's "hostile policy" include suspending annual U.S.-ROK military exercises, negotiating a peace treaty, and initiating regular government-to-government contacts, including possible diplomatic recognition. The latter should be seen as establishing a channel of communication, not providing a reward. Refusing to talk with the Soviet Union would not have shortened the Cold War.

The United States should also move to disengage militarily from the Korean Peninsula. South Korea long has been capable of expanding its military and defending itself from its vastly poorer adversary. Such a step would sharply reduce the potential for conflict between Washington and Pyongyang. It is America's participation in the Korean imbroglio that is making the country into a nuclear target. If the North successfully tops ICBMs with nuclear weapons, the risk of a new Korean conflict for the United States will have risen exponentially. Yet there is nothing at stake in the peninsula that justifies Washington's participation in a nuclear conflict.

Washington also needs to look for alternatives to the present apparent choice between a nuclear North Korea or Second Korean War. One is to encourage the South to develop a countervailing deterrent. A majority of South Koreans back this course. Doing so would allow Washington to drop its "nuclear umbrella" over the ROK and leave the nuclear threats to others. Even more important, the possibility of a South Korean nuke—and a companion Japanese weapon—would get China's attention. Beijing might seek to be more "persuasive" in halting the DPRK's program.

Finally, if its other strategies fail, the United States should consider reluctantly accepting a nuclear North Korea, rather like the Bush administration recognized a nuclear India, and relying on deterrence, as America did against Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union. Washington then should

negotiate to freeze the current program. That would, of course, require inspections and verification, and satisfy no one. But far better to face a North Korea with a nuclear arsenal capped at, say, twenty bombs than a North Korea possessing 100 nukes with more to come. Second best still is better than the other options.

The DPRK's latest tests are unnerving but not new. And they have changed nothing: the North currently is not capable of hitting American cities. It may gain that ability more quickly than once thought, but it remains only a possibility. Contrary to the president's rhetoric, there is no immediate crisis, and certainly no justification for war.

If the president wants to solve the problem, he will ratchet back his irresponsible rhetoric and stop inadvertently affirming Kim's nuclear efforts. America is the world's greatest and most powerful nation. Its leader shouldn't sound and act like the dictator of a small, impoverished, and deadend state half the world away.