



Reality Check on North Korea: How can the U.S. stop this march to war with North Korea? Open our eyes.

Charles Knight, *U.S. News and World Report*, 20 February 2018

Returning from the Winter Olympics in Korea, Vice President Mike Pence [said](#), "The president has made it clear he always believes in talking [with North Korea]. But talking is not negotiating." In other words, the only talking Washington will do with North Korea is to reiterate the oft-repeated demand to give up its nuclear weapons. Such "talk" is an ultimatum.

Last month President Trump summarized his policy toward North Korea in the State Of The Union [address](#). He spoke of "maximum pressure" to prevent North Korea's "pursuit of nuclear missiles [that] could very soon threaten our homeland." He added, "Concessions only invite aggression and provocation."

Consider the policy of "no concessions." There can be no real-world negotiation of a conflict without give and take. Any successful diplomatic process requires some concessions from all parties, something Donald "The Art of the Deal" Trump surely has learned from his years as a businessman. This helps us to make sense of his October tweet:

"I told Rex Tillerson, our wonderful Secretary of State, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man..."

— Donald J. Trump (@realDonaldTrump) [October 1, 2017](#)

He is right; a demand to surrender arms is not a negotiation and it does not require a diplomat to deliver it.

Nonetheless, leaders who make truculent demands to other nations are in deep trouble if they are unwilling to make concessions to reality.

I recently traveled in northeast Asia gathering perspectives on the Korean crisis from international relations specialists and defense analysts at leading universities and institutes in the three countries that border on North Korea: China, Russia and South Korea.

Among those with whom I spoke there was nearly unanimous agreement that North Korea is now a *de facto* nuclear-weapon state (not unlike India, Pakistan and Israel) and that they will never give up those weapons – at least until they no longer fear the hostility of the United States.

Now consider the policy of "maximum pressure" (sometimes called *coercive diplomacy*). It seeks to force disarmament on North Korea using economic sanctions, threats to "decapitate" the regime and the demonstration effects of allied military exercises involving carrier task forces and nuclear-capable stealth bombers. On the receiving end, the North Koreans interpret these "pressures" as actual preparations to launch a war meant to destroy their nation.

North Korea's rush to develop the long-range missiles and warheads that will put U.S. cities at risk follows quite logically from this perception. For North Korea, it is a matter of survival to have those very same nuclear missiles President Trump warns "threatens our homeland."

Both parties have been proceeding according to their differing logics toward ever more hostile rhetoric and offensive military preparations experienced by the other as existentially threatening. It is now all too easy to imagine multiple paths to a tragic large-scale war.

How do we begin to unwind this logic of pending war?

Firstly, the U.S. must make a concession to reality. The U.S. is operating in dangerous denial when it demands a focus on full nuclear disarmament as a precondition to serious talks. Instead, working

through back-channels, the U.S. must acknowledge to the North Koreans the reality of their nuclear deterrent force.

This move is key to the North Koreans feeling sufficiently secure to afford sincere and potentially productive negotiations without further demonstrations of their deterrent force. Contrary to the 'punishment' logic of current U.S. policy, it is in the interest of the U.S. that North Korea feels secure.

The U.S. must also end public threats of counter-proliferation strikes and regime decapitation operations which are intrinsically provocative and increase the likelihood of "reckless" responses from North Korea. The upcoming U.S.–South Korean military exercises must be scaled back and they should de-emphasize the types of operations North Koreans will likely interpret as offensive.

These and other confidence-building measures will serve to make real for the North Koreans the *sotto voce* recognition of their nuclear deterrent through diplomatic channels.

What would the U.S. be seeking in return? Foremost, a freeze on further testing and deployment of the type of long-range missiles that can reach the U.S. I spoke with several analysts in northeast Asia who believe the North Koreans might accept this. Also a pledge to forego an atmospheric nuclear weapon test should be on the table.

North Korea will want an end to sanctions. The U.S. should offer stepped reductions of sanctions in return for verified fulfillment of arms limitations. North Korea will also want a path to permanent peace treaties and the U.S., together with South Korea, should pursue these in parallel with arms limitations talks. Denuclearization of the peninsula should remain an ultimate goal and peace treaties are a necessary step along the way.

North Korea is most likely to agree to verifiable arms limitations if there is a credible path for them to significantly improve their national security, end sanctions and achieve international political normalcy, including ultimately diplomatic recognition from the U.S.

This is a rare moment in international relations when the U.S., Russia, China, Japan and South Korea have a common interest in limiting the further development of North Korea's nuclear force. Every reasonable avenue should be explored for making common cause to prevent war while also achieving a realistic degree of limitations on North Korea's nuclear and missile arms.

It is also an exceedingly dangerous time. There is a need for 'statesman-like' initiatives, perhaps led by diplomats from countries such as Canada, Finland, South Africa or Cuba, to name just a few of the possibilities. Brave members of Congress and other parliaments should join these 'Track II' efforts. Citizen groups can organize political pressure on officials.

While visiting the vast and prosperous city of Seoul I experienced an eerie and sickening feeling knowing that hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of lives are at stake. Political leaders, diplomats and citizens around the world must work with creativity, diligence and wisdom to stop the present march toward war.

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