Donald Trump’s shock election to the US presidency in November 2016 sent waves of uncertainty throughout capitals around the world about the future direction of US foreign policy. In Asia, leaders are coming to terms with what a Trump presidency could mean for the region, especially for hot spots such as North Korea and lingering tensions among Asia’s major powers.

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Limited Options: Trump and the North Korea Conundrum

North Korea’s nuclear and missile program is understandably at the top of US President Donald Trump’s foreign policy agenda in Asia. But the administration’s options are frustratingly limited.

A fragmented decision-making process, mixed signals and the president’s Twitter account have created new risks, but US policy so far hasn’t departed much from that of previous administrations.

ANY ANALYSIS of the Trump administration’s approach to North Korea has to begin by acknowledging the virtually intractable nature of the problem. North Korea’s missile and nuclear capabilities are expanding rapidly, which in itself increases the regime’s commitment to the two programs. The tools at the disposal of the US are limited. Military options are highly risky and economic sanctions must work through a multilateral format or go the secondary sanctions route: using the leverage of the US financial system to punish third parties doing business with North Korea. Ironically, sanctions are probably working to create serious problems for the North Korean economy, but in a slow-motion fashion that raises the level of frustration in a White House not known for its patience.

The diplomatic challenges are equally daunting. China, and to a lesser extent Russia, play key roles in diplomacy on the Korean Peninsula. However, both remain ambivalent about how far to press Pyongyang. The political priors of South Korean President Moon Jae-in intuitively favor engagement, and the cross-pressures emanating from the harder line favored by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe pose additional difficulties.

Given these constraints, it is not surprising that the US administration has been forced to move back toward political positions that reflect more mainstream approaches to the Korean Peninsula. First and foremost in this regard is recognition of the centrality of the two Northeast Asian alliances and the importance of American commitments to them. After a campaign in which Seoul and Tokyo were treated in casual and even demeaning fashion, the administration came to its senses and sent a succession of reassurance tours through the two capitals including by Vice President Mike Pence and Secretaries Rex Tillerson and Jim Mattis. Not all is well in the two key partnerships, particularly on the economic front. But the president’s team has at least undone some of the damage of the campaign, and thanks to North Korea, the two relationships have strengthened at both the political and military levels.

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The reversion to the diplomatic mean is also evident with respect to core features of strategy toward the North Korean nuclear issue. As with most incoming administrations, the Trump team quickly disavowed “strategic patience,” prematurely declaring it dead. To simplify, this Barack Obama-era approach combined a broad but sometimes ill-defined willingness to talk with a commitment to ramp up diplomatic and economic pressure on the regime.

In fact, the Trump administration’s re-christened “maximum pressure and engagement” looks surprisingly similar, but with two important departures. The first is the unsettling tendency to suggest that the US has viable military options. The second departure, and in my view much more significant, is the greater willingness to both threaten and use secondary sanctions.

Yet the key changes over the last year have not only come out of Washington, but from Chinese President Xi Jinping’s shifting calculations about how to play his North Korea cards. The North Korean issue played an important role in efforts to get US-China relations back on track after Trump’s unforced errors on the Taiwan issue. The implicit deal coming out of the Manila Summit was straightforward: the administration would delay pursuit of its protectionist economic agenda toward China in return for help on North Korea.

China has had the frustrating tendency to demonstrate its willingness to help by discrete policy measures — a new sanction or statement — rather than by whether these measures have any material effect. However, there is mounting evidence of China’s disaffection with North Korea, most clearly on display in the two new UN Security Council resolutions of 2017. Building on two resolutions passed in 2016, China has for the first time agreed to sanction North Korea’s commercial as opposed to WMD- and other weapons-related trade. By any metric, securing Chinese cooperation in this regard has to be viewed as a significant diplomatic win for the Trump administration.

But China has always had its own quid pro quo, which is its repeated insistence that sanctions are merely instrumental for getting back to talks, that the US must commit to a negotiated settlement and that military options are unacceptable. The current Chinese proposal — jointly endorsed by Russia — is the so-called “suspension-for-suspension” idea. North Korea would pause its testing or even declare a moratorium on enrichment, but the US would suspend its annual military exercises with South Korea.

This idea has proven a non-starter for the Trump administration, and there are both political and more substantive reasons why. First, the deal looks like pure extortion and buys very little. But the deeper problem is how to transition from a short-run confidence-building measure to talks that would actually address the nuclear question.

If the talks don’t follow closely on the “suspension-for-suspension” deal, the US will not only have gotten little, but will be left out on a political limb. So far, the North Koreans have shown little interest in actually talking.

The weaknesses of the Chinese proposal do not obviate the need for the US to remain open to
dialogue, and it is around this fact that the divisions and even dysfunctionality of the administration have resurfaced in the last several months. Secretary Tillerson has sought on a number of occasions to articulate the logic of “maximum pressure and engagement.” On the pressure side, the administration has not only negotiated tougher sanctions at the UN Security Council, but has issued a wide-ranging Executive Order to put pressure on obvious sanctions violators, including major Chinese groups. The administration has also been conducting a quiet retail sanctions enforcement campaign, pressuring both allies and adversaries to cut ties with North Korea and enforce multilateral commitments.

At the same time, however, Tillerson has also tried to articulate assurances that would cajole both China and North Korea. First and foremost is simply stating a willingness to negotiate. In his rip-roaring human rights speech before the Korean National Assembly, even President Trump restated the willingness to solve the problem diplomatically. Tillerson, however, has managed to go farther, consistently emphasizing the American desire to resume negotiations and publicly committing to the so-called “four nos”: that the US does not seek regime change, collapse or accelerated unification and that it has no ambitions to station troops above the 38th parallel if North Korea were to suddenly collapse.

The central problem is that the parameters for negotiations have not gotten adequate attention from either the US or Russia and China, the main proponents of a negotiated settlement. This problem surfaced dramatically over a week in mid-December when Tillerson gave an extended outline of his conception of North Korea policy before a meeting at the Atlantic Council. The secretary tripped up in confusing exploratory talks or “talks about talks” with the actual negotiations themselves. The mistake is worth quoting at length.

“We can talk about whether it’s going to be a square table or a round table if that’s what you’re excited about. But can we at least sit down and see each other face to face? And then we can begin to lay out a map, a roadmap of what we might be willing to work towards. I don’t think — it’s not realistic — to say we’re only going to talk if you come to the table ready to give up your program. They have too much invested in it. And the president is very realistic about that as well.”

Holding exploratory talks with no preconditions is relatively costless, and in fact the US point man on North Korea, Ambassador Joseph Yun, is probably already conducting them; it is a mistake to think that the US has no way of communicat- ing with the North Koreans. If there are no preconditions to such exploratory talks, then the two parties are free to put anything on the table that they want. First and foremost on the agenda for the US, Japan and South Korea will be denuclearization, whatever other issues might be added to the agenda by the North Koreans: a peace regime, sanctions relief, security guarantees.

However, if North Korea wants to hold talks—about-talks only to reveal that they have no intention of discussing their weapons programs, or that they want to be recognized as a nuclear power, then the number of such exploratory meetings will be exactly one. What is the point?

United Nations Secretary General António Guterres was more straightforward on this issue than Tillerson. As he put it in a press availability in Tokyo in December, “dialogue must have an objective … The objective for us is to achieve the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and to do it in a peaceful manner.” In the ultimate sign of division, the Department of State’s own press secretary, Heather Nauert, also chimed in that “we remain open to dialogue when North Korea is willing to conduct a credible dialogue on the peaceful denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula” (emphasis added).” Less than a week after his Atlantic Council remarks, Tillerson, apparently under instructions from the White House, had reverted to the position that North Korea must “earn its way back to the negotiating table.”

This episode leaves two somewhat contrast - ing conclusions about the North Korean conundrum. The first is that the White House and the Secretary of State seem unable to coordinate on even the most basic elements of a common strategy, a problem which only lowers the already slim chances that the North Koreans will enter into serious negotiations until compelled to do so. Trump’s Twitter account and hyperbolic statements, such as those made during his maiden outing at the United Nations, only compound the problem. Some defenders of the administration, making reference to the so-called “madman” theory, claim that the president’s threats — repeated by some others on his team — have been functional, generating uncertainty not only in Pyongyang but in Beijing as well. However, if the threats are not credible, quite the opposite is the case: the administration is drawing redlines it can’t actually enforce, further weakening the administration — and the country’s — reputation.

But the second lesson is that it is difficult to talk if the North Koreans are not interested in showing up. A stated willingness to talk is a crucial component of any strategy of coercive diplomacy and the Trump administration — or any other administration — would be constrained to make such offers. And perhaps the US could do more to cultivate a North Korean channel. But the sad fact is that Kim Jong Un appears to believe in the byungjin line of simultaneously pursuing economic development while maintaining his nuclear weapons.

There is at least some possibility that Trump, in a fit of pique, would undertake a unilateral military strike. And there is at least some possibility that the North Koreans would help him out in this regard by miscalculating as well. Yet the most likely outcome is, once again, a reversion to the mean: that the US will pursue the policy it has to date of continuing its pressure campaign, both for the defensive purpose of limiting North Korean capabilities and to force a return to the bargaining table.

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