The conflict with North Korea over its nuclear-weapons and missile programs has reached a dangerous turning point. The war of words between Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un has created an atmosphere where miscalculation on either side is possible, magnified by historical and other misunderstandings in the media, particularly in the US, about North Korea’s position.

Despite frustration in Washington with Pyongyang, the only viable option is to reject a military solution and restart talks with North Korea, writes Steve Chan.

NORTH KOREA’S weapons program has dominated the news lately. There is much hand-wringing and finger pointing at “Rocket Man,” as US President Donald Trump dubbed Kim Jong Un, but not much serious introspection, at least in the US media. Washington’s publicly stated goal is the denuclearization of North Korea. It is practicing a policy of compellence with the intent to force Pyongyang to give up its existing nuclear arsenal. This policy is distinct from, and more difficult to execute, than a policy of deterrence that seeks to prevent a counterparty from doing something before it has acted.

Far too much attention has been devoted to North Korea’s weapons capabilities — and not enough to its intentions and perceptions. An understanding of these would require one to ask what Pyongyang wants and what it believes Washington wants. One would also need to ask what Washington wants and how Washington can convince Pyongyang that it truly wants what it says it wants.

Although one can certainly disagree with Pyongyang’s analysis of the reasons behind the current impasse, one would be remiss to overlook how it sees the situation in view of three recent episodes. These pertain to US actions that should have consequences on North Korea’s thinking.

**Episode 1:** In 2003, the US invaded Iraq, claiming that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction or was about to develop them. This claim turned out to be groundless. Many in Moscow, Beijing and Pyongyang believe that the US attacked Iraq precisely because it knew Saddam did not have these weapons. In their view, the US would not have attacked if Iraq could have retaliated with these weapons. Whether the US acted because it thought Iraq had weapons of mass destruction or because it thought it did not have them, neither interpretation would be reassuring to Pyongyang. It does not require a deep understanding of international relations to see that although the US has fought many wars and intervened militarily abroad many times, it has never fought another state with nuclear weapons. An unnamed Indian general reportedly summed up the lesson from Serbia’s conflicts with Bosnia and Kosovo: “Don’t challenge the US unless you have nuclear weapons.”

**Episode 2:** In his effort to avoid Saddam’s fate, Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi offered to surrender his country’s facilities to build weapons of mass destruction. He followed this offer in December 2003 by inviting international inspectors to observe the dismantlement of his weapons program. Amid an uprising years later, NATO forces, including the US, in 2011 attacked Libya, and Gaddafi died at the hands of rebels backed by the West. Watching this episode, should one be surprised that Pyongyang could conclude that unilateral disarmament would increase its risk of being attacked? Chinese and Russian diplomats openly profess that they felt fooled by a bait-and-switch gambit by the West, turning their support for a no-fly zone in Libya into an agenda for regime change. Whether Libya had weapons of mass destruction or not did not appear to matter for the survival of Gaddafi or his regime.

**Episode 3:** In October 2017, Donald Trump “decertified” the nuclear deal that the US and other major nations had made with Iran during the Barack Obama administration. This was a multilateral agreement involving China, Russia, France, Britain and the European Union. The multilateral nature of the agreement was meant to reassure the US and Iran regarding the other side’s possible defection by increasing the multilateral cost of abandoning it. Although Washington had voted in support of this deal in the United Nations (along with 14 other members of the UN Security Council in a unanimous vote) and although US allies, the International Atomic Energy Agency and the US intelligence community all agreed that Tehran had abided by the terms of the agreement, the Trump administration decided to walk away from it. It would not be unnatural for North Korea to ask whether any deal that it may reach with the US could be enforced. What if Pyongyang disarms and Washington subsequently decides to attack North Korea? What recourse would Pyongyang have? What would the international community do? What could it do to reprimand the US?

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND WHAT’S REALLY GOING ON**

What would Americans conclude from these episodes if the shoe were on the other foot? Pertinent here is Vladimir Lenin’s remark “kto kovo?” — who (will destroy) whom? It behooves us to grasp the basic nature of the current impasse. Who is doing the threatening, and who is being threatened? Which country is practicing compellence, and which deterrence? Parenthetically, because Seoul is already at risk of a devastating attack from North Korea’s conventional artillery, one would surmise that Pyongyang’s nuclear deterrence is more likely to have primarily the US in mind.

It would be a challenging job, to say the least, to overcome North Korea’s profound skepticism. Donald Trump’s public rebuke of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, saying he is “wasting his time” seeking a diplomatic solution with Pyongyang, does not help matters. His threat to destroy North Korea with “fire and fury like the world has never seen” is also unhelpful in defusing the situation.

In addition to addressing Pyongyang’s serious
misgivings about Washington’s trustworthiness, one should decide what kind of opponent North Korea is. Is it essentially playing offense (the US media typically portray its actions as provocative and reckless), or is it essentially playing defense? If North Korea is an aggressive and expansionist power, then the proper strategy is containment and deterrence. If, however, it is an insecure power interested in diplomatic recognition and especially regime survival, then negotiation and reassurance would be the appropriate response. As Joseph Heller wrote in his classic book Catch-22, “Just because you’re paranoid doesn’t mean they aren’t after you.”

The usual tendency for the media in the US is to focus on North Korea’s capability to strike the US and its allies. This emphasis is misplaced. Except for extreme extenuating circumstances, the danger of Pyongyang attacking the US and its allies is not realistic. North Korea’s leaders are not suicidal. Their overriding goal is regime survival. They know that the moment they launch their own death warrant. They would invite a devastating retaliation that would end in their political and physical demise.

The US has lived with nuclear weapons in the hands of the Pakistanis, the Indians, the Chinese, and the Russians — as well as, of course, its allies: the UK, France and Israel (which has not openly declared having nuclear weapons, although this is public knowledge). North Korea may be different from these other nuclear states. But a compelling case has yet to be made. Has Pyongyang invaded more countries, fought more foreign wars, intervened militarily abroad more often, and mounted more terrorist attacks than these other nuclear states?

Let us say, for the sake of argument, that the US is an A+ student and North Korea is a D- student, and yet Washington appears to be excessively and even obsessively alarmed by Pyongyang’s limited weapons program. The more the US exaggerates North Korea’s capabilities and inflates its threat, the more it plays into Pyongyang’s propaganda and inadvertently abets right-wing elements in South Korea and Japan who demand nuclear weapons for their own countries. The latter development would be unfortunate, because it could lead to nuclear proliferation and precipitate an arms race in Northeast Asia. Although the public rationale for US security treaties with South Korea and Japan is to protect these allies, another reason is to “leash” their political and physical demise.

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If military force is plainly not a viable option in addressing the current impasse over North Korea’s weapons program, then Washington should start talking to Pyongyang — the sooner the better — before it backs itself further into a rhetorical corner.
could pose a danger to international peace or stability. But contrary to popular discussion and conventional wisdom (at least in the current media), this danger is more indirect and is likely to stem from Pyongyang’s military and economic vulnerability (that is, from its weakness rather than its strength).

LOWERING THE RISK

North Korea has only a small number of warheads, which are vulnerable to a pre-emptive attack by the US. Their leaders are therefore under great pressure to launch these weapons on the first warning sign of impending hostilities. They must choose between using these weapons and losing them, because they will be unable to retaliate after suffering an initial attack. Talk of decapitation and “fire and fury” can have the perverse effect of exacerbating a hair-trigger situation and further destabilizing an already tense military standoff. Lest one dismisses the possibility of a pre-emptive strike by the US, Washington came reportedly within hours of attacking North Korea’s nuclear facilities during the Clinton administration and within days of attacking Soviet missile installations in Cuba during the Kennedy administration. It also gave serious consideration in the 1960s to attacking Lop Nor, China’s nuclear test site.

Consider another example of a danger that can stem from North Korea’s weakness. Imagine if — as many in the US hope — economic sanctions really put Pyongyang under severe duress, which could still export — which could do great damage to Pyongyang’s nuclear program. Why should Beijing help? After all, Washington has not been nearly as energetic in restraining India’s weapons program, which is of concern to China. Nor has Washington fulfilled its long-standing public pledge to decrease and eventually discontinue its weapons sales to Taiwan. Evidently, the US prefers to keep the Taiwan issue alive rather than settle it, because it presents a thorn in China’s side and provides leverage to gain concessions from Beijing. Why should Beijing judge differently about North Korea? Would China end up in a weaker bargaining position if the North Korean issue is settled? In the absence of this issue, would China come under even greater US pressure if Washington no longer needed Beijing’s assistance? In short, would Beijing be better off having the North Korean problem around — simmering but not boiling over — rather than putting it to rest? Its logic should be no different than how Washington has conducted itself in the matter of Taiwan, which arguably is at the very top of Beijing’s national agenda.

If Donald Trump is indeed a transactional president, one may be able to discern signs of linkage in these two arenas. His visit to Asia in November 2017 indicates that he continues to favor bilateral negotiations in trade matters, but promotes — at least rhetorically — multilateral efforts in security matters. It is not clear how the tension between these two approaches can be reconciled. He demands that Beijing redress its trade surplus with the US and at the same time wants China’s help in dealing with Pyongyang’s nuclear program. It is unclear how these dual demands will pan out or whether they imply some attempt at issue linkage (easing US trade pressure on China in exchange for its assistance with North Korea). Judging from the recent performance of major stock markets, investors have discounted Trump’s talk of “fire and fury” and have dismissed the danger of war with North Korea. Their behavior suggests that there is no feasible military option, nor is it likely that any such options would be pursued.

**THERE IS NO MILITARY WAY OUT**

In conclusion, the window for an acceptable military solution to North Korea’s weapons program has closed. War would be devastatingly unacceptable to all concerned parties. A bellicose posture on the part of Washington is unlikely to roll back Pyongyang’s weapons program and may in fact push Seoul closer to Beijing (Trump has publicly rebuked South Korea’s president and raised trade tensions with Seoul). The only feasible and prudent way forward is to start negotiations without preconditions, and to revive the Six-Party Talks that Beijing has hosted in the past. A moratorium on US-South Korea military exercises and armed flights in North Korea’s vicinity in exchange for a moratorium on Pyongyang’s testing of nuclear warheads and missiles could provide an initial basis for discussion. This approach would point the way toward an easy, quiet, unobtrusive — and therefore politically safe — exit from the current impasse without incurring a direct reputational cost. Moscow and Beijing have made a proposal along these lines, but the US and South Korea have so far refused this step to de-escalate tensions. If talks are to take place, where would they lead? One can imagine a saddle point not fundamentally different from the multilateral agreement that required Iran to freeze its nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions. Given Trump’s recent decision to “decarerate” the Iran deal, however, this outcome is clearly not in the offing for now. Thus, in the short run, we will be faced with a deadlock that allows Pyongyang to continue its weapons program.

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