

Column: Biden must focus early on North Korea

By Dan Leaf • Nov. 15, 2020

President-elect Joe Biden and his administration will have a very full job jar as they seek to fulfil campaign promises and move away from Trump-era policies. The Korean peninsula is one area that could easily fall to the “later” category, but should not.

Failing to put proper focus on the Koreas, especially North Korea (DPRK), has two risks. The first is regression into the heightened tensions that preceded President Donald Trump’s interaction with Kim Jung-un. Such a return of high tensions would likely include resumption of DPRK nuclear and long-range missile tests. Secondly, a passive approach to Kim would push the regime into a tighter orbit with China, which would serve neither the U.S. nor the North Korean people well.

The Biden administration should establish its North Korea policy early, stating it in easily understood terms. A return to strategic patience, the approach used by Republican and Democrat administrations for more than a decade, failed — resulting in more tension and the emergence of viable nuclear threat from North Korea.

The Trump team adopted a “maximum pressure” approach accompanied by expanded and more fully enforced international sanctions against the DPRK. Perhaps in response, Kim responded with an aggressive set of missile and nuclear tests, met by bellicose rhetoric from Trump. The tension broke with two high-level summits, and tensions decreased. It is arguable, however, that maximum pressure devolved into maximum appeasement. Trump agreed to suspend South Korea-U.S. military exercises, and implicitly gave Kim a pass on human rights violations and weapons tests.

Biden can move to a new era by declaring a policy of Principled Constructive Engagement with North Korea. The policy must be principled, adhering to U.S. and international values and norms; and be constructive, finding viable ways to achieve sustainable progress in U.S.-DPRK relations.

The foundational principle of this new policy must be denuclearization of North Korea. Any explicit retreat from that demand would seriously weaken the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons and create risk far beyond Northeast Asia. The other principle that must be part of this policy’s foundation is a rules-based international order.

It may seem that those two principles preclude constructive engagement with North Korea, but that is not the case. Several practical steps fit within this framework.

The U.S. should work with North Korea to establish liaison offices in each other's capital, allowing routine communications. The international order is highly dependent on communication, and the ad hoc approach to U.S.-DPRK relations is fragile and sporadic.

The U.S. should strongly advocate a normalization of North Korean maritime boundaries on its west coast: this would be to North Korea's benefit but consistent with stated U.S. views on other maritime issues, like the disputes in the South China Sea. North Korea was disadvantaged by the Korean War armistice and subsequent decisions, resulting in demarcations wholly inconsistent with modern international rules and norms. Revising those boundaries would be a long process, but the principled thing to do.

The war has another legacy: the armistice and the fact that conflict has never formally ended. Real progress cannot be made until it is. The U.S., in partnership with South Korea, should set a practical path to reaching an end-of-war agreement.

Finally, sanctions and U.S. policy prevent most routine humanitarian assistance to the North. That is important and appropriate; sanctions are principle-based and the DPRK has earned them. However, the common people of North Korea are not to blame, and they are always at risk to natural disaster, disease and famine. The U.S. should state its willingness to provide emergency relief as part of international relief efforts should the situation warrant.

The policy of principled constructive engagement cannot be unilateral; our South Korean allies must be involved. Specifically, the Biden administration should continue military defense exercises and readdress ROK burden-sharing in a more conciliatory manner.

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