

Constructive Diplomacy Isn't Possible When We Are Demanding Capitulation

If the U.S. and its allies want a different outcome, they will have to change what they have been doing and modify their demands.

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State Department spokesman Ned Price [answered](#) a question on North Korea diplomacy today, and his answer unwittingly demonstrated the folly of the U.S. approach:

On your first question, it unfortunately is a purely hypothetical question. It's an academic question, because we have been clear and consistent in conveying publicly and through all channels available to us that we are prepared and willing to engage in constructive diplomacy with the DPRK towards what is the goal we share with our allies and partners of the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula [bold mine-DL]. And I say it's hypothetical and academic because at every turn the DPRK has failed to engage meaningfully on these offers. But were that to be the case, were the DPRK to take us up on this, we would look to see if we could devise practical steps that could help to advance what is that longer-term objective of the complete denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula.

The goal of the complete denuclearization of the peninsula is at odds with engaging in constructive diplomacy with North Korea. As long as this remains the goal of U.S. policy, there is not going to be constructive diplomacy. When "denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" means nothing more than North Korea's unilateral disarmament, North Korea isn't going to "engage meaningfully" with a demand for its own capitulation. Of course North Korea has "failed to engage," because they have no incentive to entertain the terms that the U.S. has set.

Their government isn't going to engage in a process where the end result is the dismantling of an arsenal that they have spent almost two decades building up. The U.S. and its allies can acknowledge this reality and adjust their goals accordingly, or they can sit back and watch as North Korea's nuclear arsenal and missile program continue to advance and

expand. If the U.S. and its allies want a different outcome, they will have to change what they have been doing and modify their demands.

Biden administration officials love to say that “the ball is in their court” when talking about their inability to make any diplomatic progress with other governments. The Biden administration [took](#) this line with North Korea early on, and it is not a coincidence that ever since then North Korea has continued building up its forces and [testing its missiles in record numbers](#). Saying that “the ball is in their court” lets the administration pretend that the deteriorating situation is entirely the fault of the other party. It is how they excuse their own lamentable neglect of the issue. This passivity and unwillingness to take the initiative are debilitating for U.S. diplomacy, and it is no wonder that the U.S. has so few major diplomatic achievements in recent years.

The U.S. is the more powerful and secure state, and it has the luxury of taking the first step to revive negotiations if it wishes to negotiate. Because it is much more secure, the U.S. has greater flexibility and freedom of action than North Korea, and that means that the U.S. is in a position to break the current impasse. It cannot do that if it remains wedded to maximalism and coercive tactics.

Van Jackson explained in his new book, [Pacific Power Paradox](#), what is needed to manage the problem with North Korea and its nuclear weapons:

Similarly, the North Korea problem will never be resolved through pressure attached to demands for unilateral disarmament [bold mine-DL]; the only solution lies in living with the Kim regime’s need to gird itself against ingrained perceptions of external threat while making a serious bid to change the relationship of rivalry that fuels that perception.[1]

This solution will be difficult to realize, but at least it has some chance of working and reducing instability in the relationship with North Korea. The current approach is guaranteed to produce more failures and it will almost certainly lead to more North Korean missile and nuclear tests. If the U.S. wants North Korea to engage meaningfully, it has to be willing to offer their government a reasonable compromise instead of issuing an ultimatum and threatening more economic warfare.

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Note

[1] Jackson, *Pacific Power Paradox*: p. 204.

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