INSIGHT

A shot at peace

Jerome A. Cohen and Edward J. Baker urge the US and its allies to work on a peace treaty with the North to formally end the Korean War and avoid any dire fallout from Kim Jong-un's rising nuclear rhetoric

In his New Year's Day message, North Korean leader Kim Jong-un spoke proudly of the strides his country had made in its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programmes.

He said he would continue to bolster the programmes as long as the United States remained hostile and continued its joint military exercises with South Korea. Perhaps most importantly, he said: "We have reached the final stage in preparations to test-launch an intercontinental ballistic rocket."

In response, then US president-elect Donald Trump tweeted: "North Korea just stated that it is in the final stages of developing a nuclear weapon capable of reaching parts of the US. It won't happen!"

It is not clear whether North Korea will be able to test an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) this year and whether it has succeeded in miniaturising a nuclear warhead that can be placed on such a missile. In time, however, North Korea will succeed in those efforts.

To date, UN Security Council sanctions, even though approved by China and Russia, have not prevented the North from making progress in nuclear weapon and ballistic missile technology. Sanctions could certainly be made stronger and, if strictly enforced, especially by China, might prevent further progress.

Yet China and/or Russia might veto stricter sanctions and, even if they do not, that may take more time than it will for the North to ready a nuclear-armed ICBM. More importantly, China will not enforce sanctions strictly enough to halt Pyongyang's nuclear and missile development, since that would risk the collapse of North Korea.

Should North Korea implode, Beijing could face a dual crisis: North Korean refugees flooding China, and South Korean and US troops on its northeastern border. China's consistent position has been that the way to settle this problem is by negotiations between the US and North Korea.

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Also, what does Trump mean by "It won't happen"? Does he think he can cajole China into putting sufficient pressure on the North? Even if it does not mean that he intends to prevent an ICBM test by force, once US intelligence believes the North has developed such a missile, many in Washington will urge a pre-emptive strike against the North's nuclear and missile facilities. Indeed, pressure in Congress is rising.

It is difficult to predict whether such a strike might succeed. If the US launches or even appears to be about to launch such a strike, North Korea can retaliate against the South, perhaps firing hundreds of artillery tubes it has aimed at Seoul.

If this happens, at the very least, terrible death and destruction will be inflicted not only on South Korea, but also, because of the response, on North Korea and probably northeastern China. At worst, full-scale war may break out between China and the US.

Shortly before leaving office along with the Obama administration, US defence secretary Ashton Carter suggested that the US might shoot down any test ICBM. The success of such a technologically challenging task is uncertain. It would nevertheless risk the North Korean retaliation mentioned above.

Does the US have an alternative to waiting for North Korea to develop a nuclear-armed ICBM and then taking military action against it?

Some are relying on the deployment of the THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defence) in South Korea. China adamantly opposes this because Beijing believes THAAD would be aimed at it. The US Defence Department's assurances that THAAD would be aimed solely at North Korean missiles have not comforted China.

The government of South Korean President Park Geun-hye agreed in July to the deployment of THAAD, but that agreement was greeted by large protests in the country, particularly in the area where THAAD is to be deployed.

The North has advocated ... a peace treaty, and it should welcome unconditional, exploratory talks

Since then, for other reasons, protests against Park reached the point that the National Assembly impeached her on December 9.

In these circumstances, regardless of the outcome of the impeachment proceedings, it seems unwise for the US to press for deployment under an agreement made with the discredited Park. Deployment will upset the Chinese government as well as the South Korean people, without causing the North to cease its nuclear and ICBM development.

Yet, current US Secretary of Defence James Mattis and his South Korean counterpart have increased the urgency of the issue by agreeing that THAAD deployment should be completed by the year's end.

We believe that offering to enter negotiations with North Korea for a peace treaty to formally end the Korean War is an alternative worth trying. Last June, Trump said on the campaign trail that he would welcome Kim to the US for talks. We urge that such talks be held and focus on a comprehensive peace settlement.

North Korea has refused to enter into negotiations that are conditioned on its giving up nuclear weapons or undertaken for the purpose of bringing about that result. However, for many years, the North has advocated negotiations for a peace treaty, and it should welcome unconditional, exploratory talks.

Short of a disastrous war, we believe that the only way to possibly bring about a nuclear-free Korean peninsula is as part of a comprehensive peace treaty.

Given the history of conflict between the US and North Korea, such negotiations will be very difficult. Yet, if they fail, we will be back where we are now, but no worse off.

If they succeed, the prospect of a deliberately or accidentally launched war of mass destruction in Northeast Asia will be greatly diminished, to the benefit of all.

In recent years, the US has made progress in defusing strained relations with Cuba, Iran and Myanmar – as Richard Nixon did with China and Bill Clinton with Vietnam. President Trump could do the same with the even more urgent problem of North Korea. After more than six decades, it is time for a new approach.

Jerome A. Cohen is faculty director of New York University's US-Asia Law Institute and adjunct senior fellow for Asia at the Council on Foreign Relations. Edward J. Baker, retired associate director of the Harvard-Yenching Institute, is a special adviser to the Harvard Korea Institute

Asia has opted for diplomacy on sea disputes

Elena Collinson says its militant tone on the South China Sea exposes the Trump White House as out of touch, and Australia should urge restraint as well as underline changing realities

Australians noticed when US President Donald Trump's then nominee for secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, told the Senate on January 11 that China should not be allowed access to its artificial islands in the South China Sea. If this amounted to a blockade, he would probably seek Australian participation. He said: "We've got to show back up in the region with our traditional allies in Southeast Asia."

Australians also could not have missed the brutal message emerging from Trump's phone conversation with their prime minister, Malcolm Turnbull: a volatile White House is poised to ride roughshod over old alliances, putting their contributions under intense scrutiny with an eye to what Washington gets in return.

But the nations of Southeast Asia that claim territory in the South China Sea have settled on diplomacy. None is seeking a US show of force or asking for US intervention. It's uncertain for whom America would be mounting blockades.

The Philippines is the most dramatic example of one-on-one diplomacy with China, producing a kind of détente. In November, following President Rodrigo Duterte's visit to Beijing, there was a quiet withdrawal of the Chinese troop ships and dredging barges that had reportedly arrived in Scarborough Shoal a few months earlier. Three hundred Filipino fishermen were reported to have returned to the shoal.

The biggest sign that Manila has downgraded the dispute was the low-key way it registered its protest at China's installation of anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems on artificial islands in the Spratlys. The "note verbale" without fanfare or press releases was a shift from the megaphone diplomacy in place since 2010.

And it is not just the Philippines. The general secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Nguyen Phu Trong, visited Beijing last month and the two sides issued a joint communiqué pledging to "manage well their maritime difference". This followed a port call by Chinese warships at Cam Ranh Bay in October on Vietnam's invitation. In short, Vietnam has not stepped forward to assume the leadership that the Philippines once showed in agitating against China.

With all of Southeast Asia engaging with it, Beijing would lose a lot by returning to assertiveness

This cordiality between China and Vietnam is likely to be confirmed when President Xi Jinping (習近平) visits Vietnam later this year. Some diplomatic sources believe Vietnam has interest in joint management of disputed maritime territory that might focus on environmental questions and fisheries management.

That appears to be what the Philippines and China are doing. Two Philippine coast guard vessels arrived at Scarborough Shoal on November 5 to start regular patrols, with four more ships planned for deployment. There have been no reports of clashes with the Chinese. Indeed, both sides cooperated in search-and-rescue efforts for missing Filipino fishermen.

If Vietnam is not stepping in to take the place of the Philippines, neither is Malaysia. The visit to Beijing by Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Razak in November saw the signing of a memorandum of understanding on naval cooperation – the first major attempt at a defence pact between the two countries.

An Australian news headline last year suggested joint patrols of the South China Sea by Indonesia and Australia. But there is no sign Jakarta wants to depart from non-alignment, let alone inherit from Manila the leadership of an anti-Chinese position within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

So how would Secretary Tillerson justify a blockade? No US allies or partners – Japan, Singapore or India – have shown the slightest interest in joining in. It would arguably be a breach of international law and very likely to be viewed by China as an act of war.

As for China, there are competing strands at work in its foreign policy. Its behaviour oscillates between rising-power forcefulness and cautious diplomacy. But with all of Southeast Asia engaging with it, Beijing would lose a lot by returning to assertiveness. In a sense, it is locked into restraint by its recent diplomacy.

Meanwhile, Australia should keep its options open and counsel restraint on all sides. It might even let the Trump administration know that, while they have been settling into new offices, in the South China Sea diplomacy seems to have become the order of the day.

Elena Collinson is a researcher at the Australia-China Relations Institute at the University of Technology Sydney

A Filipino fisherman prepares to cast a line at Scarborough Shoal on November 3. Photo: Reuters

Inconvenient truth of sectional interests in a small-circle election

Gary Cheung says the nature of the race for chief executive and composition of the Election Committee mean serious hopefuls must bow to certain pressures

In November 2011, Leung Chun-ying and Henry Tang Ying-yen declared their candidacy for chief executive. In the next two months, the pair rolled out their manifestos on policy areas, setting the stage for vigorous debates in the run-up to the March 2012 election.

This time, with only seven weeks to go before the Election Committee picks the city's next leader, there is a lack of serious debate on candidates' platforms. On December 14, retired judge Woo Kwok-hing became the first contender to announce his election platform. Rival aspirant and former security chief Regina Ip Lau Suk-yee rolled out her manifesto the following day. But neither drew much media attention as their chances of winning are slim.

Former chief secretary Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor had yet to complete her platform when she hosted a star-studded election rally last Friday, while ex-finance chief John Tsang Chun-wah called on the public to share their thoughts on his Facebook page and only unveiled his platform this week.

The apparent irrelevance of platforms is inconceivable in what is one of the tightest races for the top job since the handover. But this is attributable to the inconvenient truth that they do not make much difference in the small-circle election decided by the 1,194 members of the Election Committee. In the past few weeks, dozens of Beijing-friendly politicians and groups lined up to back Lam, citing her track record, even before she declared her manifesto, amid pro-Beijing newspapers' extensive coverage of her candidacy and electioneering.

Meanwhile, some pan-democrats on the Election Committee favour Tsang because of his pledge to unite society. Underdog Woo had a point when he queried why some electors had decided to support candidates who have yet to unveil their manifesto.

The very nature of the chief executive race – decided by a panel stacked with Beijing loyalists and interest groups – forces candidates to bow to pressure from sectional interests. Last month, Lam and Ip met Election Committee members from the agriculture and fisheries subsector, which has 60 seats, though the industry only accounts for 0.1 per cent of the city's gross domestic product, double the seats of any professional subsector, such as accountancy or education.

Yet both Lam and Ip later sidestepped questions on whether they would seek to reduce the number of seats reserved for the subsector in future chief executive elections, an idea backed by forces across the political spectrum and mulled by senior government officials in the consultation on electoral reform from 2014 to 2015. Lam only said it still played an important role as "demand for quality farming, fishery products and beautiful flowers is strong". Don't be surprised if the Federation of Trade Unions backs Lam even if she is unlikely to introduce standard working hours, a key demand of the pro-Beijing flagship.

The "innovative" ideas put forward by three candidates during their meetings last week with the Heung Yee Kuk, which holds 26 seats, underscored how they have no choice but to cater to sectional interests if they want their support.

Tsang suggested a "mixed development mode" of small-house construction with subsidised Home Ownership Scheme (HOS) flats for efficient use of village land, where, say, a plot could house a six-storey block – with three floors used by a villager family and the rest to be sold to non-villagers as subsidised housing. The small-house policy favouring male villagers is seen as a privilege that should be rescinded to ease the land shortage. Tsang's proposal sparked queries whether it would affect the interests of those applying for HOS flats.

Ip proposed allowing villagers to build multi-storied small houses, a rehash of Henry Tang's suggestion in 2012. We will see more "innovative" ideas before March 26, the day when our next chief leader is to be "selected".

Gary Cheung is the Post's political editor

Think before judging parents

Christian Chan says the furore over the supposed overuse of stimulants to help children with ADHD may be hypocritical, given the realities of our world

A Hong Kong psychiatrist recently said in a Facebook post that some primary school children diagnosed with mild symptoms of attention deficit hyperactive disorder (ADHD) were using prescribed medication – which are essentially stimulants – to enhance their attention and, in turn, their academic performance. He claimed that this was becoming a problem in some schools.

Predictably, the post raised a hue and cry, with parents and others lamenting that the exam-driven school system was turning our children into drug addicts. But beyond the potential side effects of the medication, there appears to be something morally wrong here.

Should we blame the parents and teachers for pushing children so hard? Or condemn the psychiatrists and pharmaceutical companies for pushing their drugs? Critics are quick to disparage the Territory-wide System Assessment and its new facade, the Basic Competency Assessment research study, as well as education secretary Eddie Ng Hak-kim. But the issue isn't so straightforward.

One argument against the use of stimulants is that it creates an unfair advantage for those with access to the drug. Not all families can afford the specialists' visits and medication. But we should probably work to remove the unfair advantage created by better schools and better tutors, and better access to resources more generally. Why permit one form of advantage and condemn another?

Another argument is that the medication reduces the need for effort. We should teach our children to value effort and not just achievement, the logic goes. This is a utopian view. We can't ask the International Olympic Committee to hand out medals to our athletes for their effort, can we?

The third argument is that these medications are "unnatural", that we should let children grow and learn naturally. But we are okay with milk formula with all sorts of chemicals that allegedly enhance brain development.

The fourth argument is that children are underage, they are not informed consumers. But the problem with this argument is, we are already forcing all sorts of things on them, like vitamins and after-school programmes, allegedly for their own sake.

We have conditioned ourselves and our children to believe in a certain world view. Few of us would openly admit that we think success, usually financial, is the only path to happiness. But that is exactly what we practise, preach, and celebrate. It is hypocritical of us to wag our fingers at parents for trying everything they can to ensure their children's success – to the extent that they are willing to push "smart pills" on them – when we too are part of this rat race.

Until we can provide a better alternative to the prevailing world view, I suggest we stop judging these desperate parents.

Christian Chan is assistant professor at the Department of Psychology, the University of Hong Kong