



Criticizing Trump on North Korea as a Progressive

It's easy for the principled, progressive approach on North Korea to get lost amidst the personalities and the politics of the Trump era. Donald Trump's engagement on North Korea has ranged from "fire and fury" threats of nuclear war to exchanges of "love letters." He hired noted war enthusiast John Bolton and then fired him. With this in mind, below are key "do's and don'ts" to guide progressives on how to hit Trump on his North Korea policy from the left, and the right-wing talking points that should be avoided.

Make no mistake, it's important for progressives to get this right. Far too often, the impulse to seemingly score political points by bashing Trump's engagement with North Korea can inadvertently reinforce hawkish tropes that delegitimize diplomacy itself, dismiss the will of the Korean people, and ultimately harm the prospects for resolving a problem that will outlast this presidency.

DON'T echo unrealistic demands. Making all-or-nothing demands that North Korea should unilaterally disarm before providing any sanctions relief, security guarantees, or other incentives is unrealistic and sets impossible benchmarks for future administrations to meet. This is a tried and failed approach, and a new one is needed that builds trust to work towards a comprehensive resolution of the conflict that addresses North Korea's nuclear weapons program and the root causes of North Korea's insecurity.

DON'T embrace the failed status quo. The United States is not better off returning to its decades-long policy of ignoring North Korea, also known as "strategic patience." Continuing to isolate and pressure North Korea will only fuel its hostility and nuclear aspirations. That means more nuclear weapons, more human rights violations, more separated families, more suffering from sanctions. At worst, it means nuclear war.

DON'T reinforce the overly simplistic frame that "Trump is siding with Kim Jong Un" or that diplomacy is somehow a concession that legitimizes Kim Jong Un.

- While there is no doubt that Trump's prioritization of personality-driven diplomacy has been ineffective, contending that Trump is "legitimizing Kim Jong Un" only serves to undermine the notion of talks themselves. (Remember that conservatives hit President Obama with this same talking point when he said he'd meet with adversarial world leaders without preconditions.) This position is anathema to progress.
- By definition, diplomacy involves talking to, meeting with, and making deals with friends and adversarial actors alike. Talking and negotiating with North Korea should not be viewed differently than doing so with any other authoritarian powers — which the United States does regularly.

DO sharply criticize Trump for doing diplomacy badly. There is plenty of room to criticize Trump, from his inconsistent messaging, maximalist demands, and failure to empower working-level talks. The absence of a coherent diplomatic process will further undermine the prospects for a deal that could freeze or rollback North Korea's nuclear program.

DO champion ending the war. The unresolved Korean War, which ended in an armistice, has perpetuated nearly 70 years of hostilities between the United States and North Korea. Announcing a symbolic end to the war and working toward a peace agreement is essential to transforming relations, which is critically intertwined with making real progress on denuclearization.

DO support our South Korean allies. Promoting diplomacy and pursuing a changed relationship with North Korea is not only in the national security interests of the United States, but also our South Korean ally who has spearheaded the push for talks on denuclearization and peace on the Korean Peninsula. No country has more at stake in this conflict than South Korea. Praise for the U.S.-South Korea relationship should not be limited to military and economic cooperation. It is critical for progressives to uplift South Korea's pro-diplomacy stance, which has been vital in improving inter-Korean relations, reducing military tensions, and supporting U.S.-North Korea engagement.