

Time for America to head for the exit

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Updated on *Oct 18, 2010*

North Korea has officially unveiled the youngest son and heir apparent of "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il. Yet again the impoverished dictatorship has captured the world's attention. But the US should leave the problem of dealing with Pyongyang to the North's neighbours.

North Korea poses no threat to America. Its economy is a wreck. The military equips undertrained, malnourished soldiers with ancient equipment. One American aircraft carrier has more firepower than the entire North Korean military.

What of Pyongyang's putative nuclear arsenal? The North probably hasn't miniaturised any weapons that it might have constructed. North Korea also doesn't have a missile capable of hitting America, let alone doing so accurately.

Moreover, Kim is evil, not stupid. He knows that the United States could wipe his nation off the map. He wants his virgins in this life, not the next, and wouldn't waste his time attempting to pass power to his son if he planned self-immolation in a pyre of fire.

Deterrence worked against Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong , and Kim's father, Kim Il-sung. It will work against Kim Jong-il.

The North poses a greater threat to South Korea, but even here the purported danger is exaggerated. The South is far ahead on most measures of national power. Indeed, the South felt so secure that it spent much of the past decade investing in and aiding Pyongyang. If the Seoul government isn't worried about its national security, then Americans shouldn't give it much thought.

The only reason Washington is so deeply involved in the peninsula's politics is because of its long-standing security guarantee to the South. America's 27,000 troops should come home.

The US has another objective: to dissuade the North from building nuclear weapons. But nearly two decades of negotiation appear to be at a dead end. In fact, current politics in Pyongyang works against any negotiated solution. Two years ago, Kim suffered a stroke. Being less vigorous physically and weaker politically, Kim is less able to face down the military and bargain away its most important weapon.

The future is even less certain. It took "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung years to move Kim Jong-il into positions of influence. The latter probably won't have as much time to do the same with his son, Kim Jong-un. And there are numerous claimants to power: a brother-in-law and sister, two more sons, a motley collection of other family members, and many

party and military officials who have been waiting for years for their opportunity to rule. Thus, the next government will probably be weak and divided.

It is a nasty situation. But why are Americans expected to sort out the mess? Washington should turn the issue back to Pyongyang's neighbours. Any map demonstrates that North Korea is primarily an issue for South Korea, Japan and China. American disengagement would force the Chinese government to confront the North Korean "problem".

America can no longer afford to garrison the world. The Korean Peninsula is a good place for the US to again start acting like a republic.

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