

Forbes

North Korea Threatens Fifth Nuclear Test: U.S. Should Offer To Swap Military Exercises For Nuke Halt

Doug Bandow

April 25, 2016

Whatever the issue and occasion, North Korean ambitions loom large. Foreign Minister Ri Su-yong recently opined that the confrontation between America and his nation “will lead to very catastrophic results, not only for the two countries but for the whole entire world as well.” Actually, most of the world doesn’t much notice the North and wouldn’t be particularly affected by conflict there.

Nevertheless, confrontation would be bad for the two countries and those nations neighboring the peninsula. Everyone would benefit if international relationships involving the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea became more normal.

With the backdrop of a claimed submarine-launched missile test and threatened fifth nuclear test, Ri was interviewed by the Associated Press. He defended the right of his nation to possess nukes and blamed American hostility for forcing the DPRK to create a nuclear deterrent in self-defense. The latest missile test, he said, gives the North “one more means for powerful nuclear attack.”

While expressing his purported concern for the “whole entire world,” Ri suggested a potential deal between North Korea and America: “Stop the nuclear war exercises in the Korean Peninsula, then we should also cease our nuclear tests.” It’s an idea worth pursuing.

Pyongyang is unlikely to ever agree to fully disarm. It has spent too much developing nuclear weapons. They are the only reason other nations pay attention to the otherwise small, impoverished nation. Nukes also offer security against the world’s greatest military power, which has demonstrated a propensity for ousting the regimes of largely defenseless antagonists.

Nevertheless, there are more limited steps which Pyongyang might be willing to take, having already established its nuclear bona fides. Halting additional nuclear tests is one. Perhaps other restrictions on nuclear production and development.

Ending military exercises with South Korea would be a small price for Washington to pay. In fact, America's conventional military presence on the peninsula is superfluous, a relic of the past. The Republic of Korea long ago surpassed the North on every measure of power save military. And the latter failure is merely a matter of choice.

The ROK began to take off economically during the 1960s, under the current president's father, Park Chung-hee. Today the South possesses around 40 times the GDP of the DPRK. South Korea also has twice the population, a vast technological edge, and far greater international reach and support.

Although Seoul's forces are outnumbered by those of the North, the ROK possesses newer equipment, larger reserves, superior naval and air forces, and a much bigger industrial base. If the South wanted to match North Korea man for man and tank for tank, it could do so. But it doesn't need to, with the U.S. treating South Korea as a defense dependent. From Seoul's standpoint, why not let Washington do the job?

It is not, however, in America's interest to do so.

Of course, the ROK is not alone. The U.S. is surrounded by "allies" constantly demanding additional support and reassurance. The Europeans possess a larger collective GDP and population than America but still expect to be subsidized and coddled. Only now, 70 years after the end of World War II, has Japan authorized its forces to aid those of America if the latter are attacked. The Saudis are irritated that the Obama administration has engaged Iran, the most important Mideast state. And so it goes.

Washington's security guarantee is a bad deal for the U.S. Which creates the opportunity for a win-win agreement with North Korea. America should bring home its conventional forces. Then *South Korean forces* would be on call in the event of war. Thus, military exercises on the peninsula would serve no useful purpose.

So offer to trade away the maneuvers. Start by proposing to end exercises in exchange for the North dropping nuclear tests. Then suggest troop withdrawals. In return the DPRK might end missile tests, back its conventional units away from the border, and freeze nuclear activities. It is impossible to know what is possible without pursuing talks.

If Pyongyang was willing to deal, America could add a little extra incentive: diplomatic relations. There is no good reason not to have regular contact between the two nations. For the North it would be gaining a measure of respect from the global superpower. For the U.S. it would be opening a small window into a mysterious system, allowing policymakers to at least see through a glass darkly. A bonus would be providing the DPRK with a way to contact Washington without having to arrest another errant American for one alleged crime or another.

Of course, Ri might have been speaking out of turn, though that seems unlikely in such a centralized system. The gambit might turn out to be a propaganda ploy, with the Kim regime unwilling to follow through. Pyongyang might quickly violate any agreement that it reached.

All possible. But unknowable without taking up Ri's challenge.

And no one has a better solution. Preventive war is, or at least should be, unthinkable. The latest sanctions have bitten more deeply than before, but remain inadequate to force change in Pyongyang. And nothing suggests that Beijing is prepared to jettison its unpleasant ally. At the moment, all Washington can do is watch as the DPRK continues to test nuclear weapons and missiles.

Three presidents have struggled mightily over what to do about a potentially nuclear North. So far, Pyongyang has been an insoluble problem. But Foreign Minister Ri's remarks suggest the possibility of at least reducing the threat posed by North Korea. The administration should take up the challenge.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties.