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North Korea Advances Along The Nuclear Path: Washington Should Switch From Coercion to Engagement

By Doug Bandow

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North Korea continues along the nuclear path. A new report warns that Pyongyang could amass a nuclear arsenal as large as 100 weapons by 2020. With that many warheads the North would move from marginal local player to significant regional power in the same league as India, Israel, and Pakistan. Iran's potential program, currently the subject of frenzied negotiation, suddenly looks much less threatening.

Washington has no realistic strategy to deal with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Some policymakers have advocated offensive military action, but that likely would trigger a war which would devastate South Korea. In contrast to Iran, U.S. presidents long ago stopped intoning that "all options" are on the table. The price of war simply would be too high.

The Obama administration's chief policy has been to reaffirm Washington's defensive alliance with the South. Then-U.S. military commander Gen. James D. Thurman said in 2013: "We've got to keep a close watch on [Kim Jong-un], every day, and that's what we try to do."

Some 28,500 U.S. troops are on station, backed by conventional forces elsewhere in the region. The Center for a New American Security recently recommended that the Pentagon draft contingency plans "for the possibility of limited military campaigns on the Korean peninsula" short of the full-scale war. The administration also is prepared to deploy Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense. Moreover, Washington maintains a nuclear umbrella over the South.

However, such steps have little effect on the North's nuclear development since offensive action is not the program's purpose. Rather, the DPRK sees nukes as protection against the allies' overwhelming military strength, prestige for an otherwise geopolitical nullity, potent tool of

extortion, and domestic reward for North Korea's military. In fact, the more ostentatious the allies' military preparations, the greater Pyongyang's incentive to expand its nuclear capabilities.

Some analysts look to more economic sanctions to stop a North Korea bomb. A United Nations Panel of Experts recently proposed penalizing the North's space agency, the National Aerospace Development Administration. Zach Przystup of Tufts University's Fletcher School called for "the U.S. and its partners to work to tighten sanctions and stop the flow of luxury goods into North Korea." Undoubtedly, more could be done, but neither China nor Russia is likely to approve new UN penalties. Additional U.S. sanctions alone aren't likely to cause the North to surrender a program deemed essential to the regime's international standing and domestic stability. Only if China agreed to end all aid, investment, and trade would sanctions reach critical effect, but Beijing so far refuses to destabilize its recalcitrant neighbor.

There also is the increasingly forlorn hope for negotiation. U.S. officials confidently assert that North Korea would be better off trading away its nuclear program, but the DPRK obviously has concluded otherwise. And why should Pyongyang trust paper guarantees against the sort of regime change and territorial dismemberment which Washington has imposed on Serbia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya? What could Washington offer that would be more valuable than a nuclear arsenal? Voluntary disarmament seems especially unlikely given the critical political role played by the military in North Korea.

Some policymakers look to Chinese pressure on the North as a panacea. However, Beijing has yet to fully enforce existing sanctions. The People's Republic of China is not inclined to cut off energy and food, as requested by Washington, which might violently collapse the North Korean state. Certainly Beijing won't do so unless the U.S. convinces the Chinese government that doing so would be in the PRC's interest, which is unlikely so long as Washington's Asian military policies—especially maintaining the Republic of Korea as an advanced base—remain unchanged.

The Obama administration should adopt a different approach. Instead of attempting to micro-manage the region, Washington should leave the Korean Peninsula's future up to the two Koreas and their neighbors.

The world has changed dramatically since the U.S. got involved in the Korean Peninsula in 1945. What happens in Pyongyang today is of vastly greater interest to others in the region than America.

Indeed, the North matters to Washington primarily because U.S. forces are stationed in the South. Otherwise America would have little reason to worry about North Korea—and the latter would have no interest in the U.S. The Kim regime cares about Washington because the latter's forces directly confront North Korea.

Of course, a DPRK deploying nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles theoretically could strike America. In practice that possibility is quite some time off. The North's long-range missiles are inaccurate and unreliable; the South Korean defense ministry rejects claims that Pyongyang has miniaturized nuclear warheads. More important, attacking the U.S. would ensure that North Korea ceased to exist. And the Kims always wanted their virgins in this world, not the next.

While the U.S. retains an interest in a stable Northeast Asia, even more so do the surrounding nations. The best American "leadership" would be to turn responsibility for the peninsula over to neighboring states. Let them deal with the "North Korea problem."

America's defense guarantee has deformed South Korean policy. Once an economic and political wreck, today the ROK enjoys a GDP around 40 times that of the North, population twice as big, and vast technological and international lead. Yet the South has continued to underinvest in the military despite facing an aggressive neighbor with geographically advanced conventional forces, threatening missiles, and growing nuclear program.

The South does not even command its own military in war. More than six decades after the conclusion of the Korean War Washington controls the U.S.-ROK Combined Forces Command. Transfer to Seoul, now set for December 2015, has been steadily pushed back. The South cites its own military insufficiencies, as if they were beyond its control.

Worse, South Korea has routinely subsidized its northern antagonist. For a decade Seoul followed the "Sunshine Policy," which transferred roughly \$10 billion in cash and resources to the North while the latter was pursuing nuclear weapons. Even though more conservative governments since stopped attempting to purchase Pyongyang's friendship, the South continues to provide the DPRK with roughly \$100 million annually in hard currency through the Kaesong industrial park. Indeed, Seoul recently agreed to hike wages by some five percent, money which will go to the Kim regime, not Kaesong's workers.

Today South Korea is pushing for renewed negotiations and pursuing reunification with Pyongyang, while the U.S. recently increased sanctions on the DPRK. Said Choi Kang of the Asan Institute: "The U.S. is going in one direction, and South Korea is going in the other." The ROK is entitled to set its own policy, but should bear the cost of doing so. It should not expect the American cavalry to ride in and save it in the event of disaster.

U.S. policy has had a similarly negative effect on Japan. American military support has left Tokyo as a geopolitical dependent, vulnerable to its potentially aggressive neighbors, both North Korea and China. Moreover, Tokyo's relationship with Pyongyang has been convulsed by the fate of Japanese kidnapped by the North decades ago. In terms of Korean security Japan largely has been a nullity, even though the latter has far more at stake than does America. Only recently have Tokyo and the DPRK again been attempting to reach a modus vivendi; in fact, Prime

Minister Shinzo Abe suggested the possibility of a summit if the North accounts for its earlier misbehavior.

Russia's relations with the North dipped substantially after the end of the Cold War. Ties now are on the rise. Last year Russia sent more official visitors to the DPRK than did China and ratified an earlier agreement to write off North Korean debt. Moscow is pressing to increase trade and make the DPRK into a transportation link to the South. The Putin government even invited Kim Jong-un to Russia's World War II anniversary celebrations in May. Yet these activities sound more impressive than their likely practical impact, given the North's limits—and the fact that closer relations more reflect the new “cool war” between Washington and Moscow than genuine Russian interest in North Korea. The ROK continues to offer far more to Moscow, providing investment and technology and acting as a market for Russian goods and services, including weapons.

Finally, America's dominant regional role has encouraged China to manipulate the instability created by the North. Washington's ill-disguised effort to contain the PRC, which would be aided by the South's absorption of the DPRK, reinforces China's commitment to preservation of the Kim regime even at cost of the North's denuclearization. Obama administration lectures about Beijing's international responsibilities matter less to the Chinese government than U.S. military activities. At the same time, the North, frustrated in its attempt to develop alternative relationships, has had little choice but to rely on the PRC.

America should begin to act as a normal nation in Northeast Asia. Washington should end its defense guarantees and withdraw its troops from South Korea and Japan. The pull-back should be carried out in consultation with Washington's allies, but the U.S. should develop a more equal relationship based on cooperation to advance mutual objectives rather than unilateral support for other nations' interests.

Disengagement would transform the region's dynamics. First, the North would face a significantly reduced threat environment. While Pyongyang's protestations should be viewed with great cynicism, even paranoids have enemies, once observed Henry Kissinger. American officials, including current Defense Secretary Ashton Carter, have proposed military action against the North. Washington has routinely bombed, invaded, and occupied non-nuclear states. America's alliance with the South encourages the North to maintain an oversize military establishment, highlighted by WMDs.

Second, North Korea's neighbors would be accountable for the results their own policies toward Pyongyang. They could confront or bribe, challenge or enable, or do whatever else they desired concerning the North. But they no longer could rely on the U.S. to underwrite their defenses, subsidize their policies, restrain their adversaries, and mitigate their mistakes.

In particular, Beijing no longer could evade responsibility for its continued support for the Kim regime. Without a regional American military presence the PRC would have little reason to

preserve an artificial buffer state. Nor could Beijing blame U.S. hostility for causing the North to take a nuclear course. Moreover, China would face the full cost of a nuclear DPRK: absent American military guarantees, South Korea and Japan would have to rethink their commitment to a non-nuclear course. Further proliferation likely would discomfit Beijing more than North Korea.

Third, the end of overt U.S. hostility would ease Pyongyang's entry into more normal relationships around the world. Although the DPRK has been called the Hermit Kingdom, it has been reaching out in recent days. For instance, the Kim regime has been improving links with African and Middle Eastern states. Trade even is expanding in Asia and Europe. This process empowers the DPRK, but also creates greater incentives for the North to behave more reasonably.

Fourth, the U.S. would find it easier to improve relations with North Korea from a distance. The North has proved to be a difficult actor, but long desired direct talks with Washington. Indeed, the 1994 Agreed Framework included a promise to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations." Ironically, Pyongyang wants a better relationship for the same reason that Seoul does: as a distant power the U.S. would help the North balance its more immediate, overbearing neighbors.

Although the Obama administration recently tightened sanctions in response to the hacking of Sony Pictures, the U.S. and North apparently have been talking about having talks. An unnamed U.S. official said that "we want to test if they have an interest in resuming negotiations," but "we've made it very clear that we could like to see them take some steps first." One proposal is for a North Korean meeting with Sung Kim, America's special envoy for North Korea.

The U.S. also has agreed with China, the ROK, Japan, and Russia to exploratory talks with the North on restarting the Six-Party Talks. Exactly how preliminary Six-Party Talks would differ from formal Six-Party Talks is unclear, but the last negotiations broke down in 2008 and Pyongyang officially dropped out the following year. Until now Washington has insisted that the North take concrete steps toward denuclearization before resuming negotiations.

As noted earlier, that remains unlikely. North Korea is more interested in receiving validation as a nuclear power than abandoning its nuclear ambitions. Rather than push multilateral discussions unlikely to generate a positive result, the U.S. should cede leadership to other participants. At the same time, Washington should initiate bilateral talks intended to open low level diplomatic relations, create selected economic opportunities, and offer expanded ties if the North responds positively. While transformation via engagement is a long-shot, transformation via coercion has failed. Opening a regular dialogue offers a better chance for human rights improvement than increased threats.

Diplomacy may have a small chance of success, but the young Kim appears serious about reforming the DPRK's economy. His government has made a public commitment to growth,

which has been aided by the influx of Chinese money. Pyongyang has implemented market-oriented reforms in both agriculture and industry and expanded special economic zones. Periodic attempts to reign in private markets only have stoked dissatisfaction with the state. Opined the *Economist* magazine: “To an extent, the recent top-down measures may be an acknowledgement that the bottom-up change of the past 15 or so years is irreversible.” Pyongyang might have a greater interest than before in an economic opening to America.

As part of this process, Washington should indicate its willingness to sign a peace treaty and end the formal state of war. (South Korea should do the same.) This step would not be a reward, but simple recognition of peace, which would eliminate a justification for continued U.S. military presence and might help allay any genuine North Korean security concerns.

North Korea is Northeast Asia’s biggest security problem. But it is not—or at least should not be—America’s security problem. The U.S. is overextended overseas and perpetually at war and risk of war because Washington insists on making virtually every other nation’s conflict America’s conflict. That strategy should have ended along with the Cold War. The Korean Peninsula matters primarily to the Koreans and their neighbors. They, not America, should be responsible for reshaping Northeast Asia.

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