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What Can Possibly Be Done About North Korea?

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GOP frontrunner Donald Trump may say a lot inaccurate things on the campaign trail, but calling North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un a "maniac" is not one of them. This was confirmed yet again late on Tuesday night, January 6, when North Korea claims to have conducted its fourth nuclear test in nine years. The underground explosion was registered as a magnitude 5.1 seismic event by the U.S. Geological Survey in an area roughly near the site of previous tests that were carried out over the years.

North Korea's propaganda-induced state television was jubilant and cheerful, reporting in its own colorful way that the mighty Kim Jong-un pulled another rabbit out of his hat: "Make the world ... look up to our strong nuclear country and labor party by opening the year with exciting noise of the first hydrogen bomb!"

A North Korean nuclear test is one of those issues that tends to get the attention of presidential candidates on the campaign trail. And the answer was uniformly and rightly negative. Donald Trump, Marco Rubio, Chris Christie, Ted Cruz, Hillary Clinton, and Bernie Sanders don't agree on a lot of things, but condemning North Korea's reckless behavior has brought all of these candidates together for a short period of time.

"I strongly condemn North Korea's apparent nuclear test," Democratic frontrunner Hillary Clinton said in a written statement. "If verified, this is a provocative and dangerous act, and North Korea must have no doubt that we will take whatever steps are necessary to defend ourselves and our treaty allies, South Korea and Japan." With the exception of practically blaming President Barack Obama and Secretary Clinton for North Korea's latest nuclear test, Marco Rubio had a similar tone in his own statement: "I have been warning throughout this campaign that North Korea is run by a lunatic who has been expanding his nuclear arsenal..."

The United Nations Security Council called an emergency meeting on the North Korea less than 24 hours after the test occurred in what can only be described as the same, never-ending story of attack, counterattack: North Korea does something bad, like violate a series of Security Council resolutions, and the U.N. responds by holding another meeting and considering yet more

economic sanctions on the North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear program. The international community in the meantime finds itself in the same place with North Korea as October 2006, when the reclusive country unleashed its first nuclear explosion -- a member of the Kim dynasty with a growing and increasingly capable nuclear capability, and a world desperately trying to push Pyongyang to re-engage in nuclear disarmament talks.

If the Iranian nuclear program was an international crisis that had a resolution through hard-nosed and consistent diplomacy, the North Korean nuclear program is one of those problems that seems to be immune to pressure and engagement alike. But the United States and its partners on the Security Council (particularly the Chinese) cannot simply ignore Kim Jong-un's latest "provocation" for fear that doing nothing will convince Pyongyang that it can get away with deliberately flouting international law.

The \$64,000 question is what more can be done that hasn't been done already? I see only three general options, each one with its own costs and benefits.

More Sanctions at the U.N.: The default position of the Security Council whenever North Korea starts acting like a baby is additional sanctions, either through further restrictions on banking and financial services or the inclusion of more North Korean political and military officials on the U.N.'s travel ban and asset freeze list. None of those sanctions, however, have done much to alter North Korea's behavior in the nuclear realm; North Korea is still working to improve its ballistic missile technology, continues to test weapons underground, and has expanded its nuclear options by enriching uranium.

If the purpose of the Security Council sanctions has been to compel North Korea to "abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner," they clearly haven't worked. The Security Council has passed a total of 11 resolutions on North Korea's ballistic missile and nuclear program since 2006, with penalties as wide-ranging as a full embargo on the export and import of weapons to North Korea and the inspection of flag vessels on the high seas that are suspected of carrying illicit cargo to and from the North. Is there any action that the Security Council can take that would substantially enhance the punitive impact on North Korea, persuading its leadership to change its behavior and return to the Six Party Talks format that has been dormant for years? Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation recommends a Chapter 7 resolution, which would allow the international community to enforce the sanctions on North Korea through military force if need be. Whether China or Russia would go that route, however, is a big "if."

Engage in Dialogue: Asking North Korean diplomats to sit down and talk about their problems, wants, and desires is never a popular scenario in Washington D.C., but it is nonetheless an option on the table for President Barack Obama, whose administration has expressed support for talking with North Korea on the nuclear file in the past. Doug Bandow of the Cato Institute writes that renewed engagement may be just what the doctor ordered.

One could make the very legitimate argument that engagement with the United States is precisely what Kim wants. By testing a nuclear explosive device and once again putting the world on notice, North Korea is in effect using military means in order to seek parity in the event

that diplomacy with Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow transforms from an option into a reality.

The bright, blinking-yellow light of caution, however, is that North Korea is not at all interested in denuclearization -- a process whereby Pyongyang admits IAEA inspectors into the country, agrees to forgo any further nuclear weapons tests, and gradually dismantles its nuclear infrastructure in much the same manner as the Iranians. In addition to remarks from Kim himself that North Korea would never willingly disarm itself, it would be the point of insanity from the North's point of view to voluntarily give away the one weapon that guarantees that Washington or South Korea would refrain from pursue aggressive regime change. If the United States continues to resist dropping its demand of full and complete denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula and North Korea refuses to even broach the subject of ceasing its nuclear work, diplomats running the Six Party Talks wouldn't have much to talk about.

Military Force: Believe it or not, there are some people in Washington who continue to advocate for the use of preemptive U.S. military force on North Korea's nuclear facilities in order to degrade its capability and ensure that its work is set back by several years. Before Ashton Carter was Secretary of Defense, he partnered with former Secretary of Defense William Perry in a [Washington Post](#) op-ed. In that piece, the two recommend a preemptive U.S. strike on North Korea's missile silos send a clear and unequivocal warning shot the North Korean leadership that the world will not allow North Korea to become a nuclear weapon state with the capacity to utilize intercontinental ballistic missiles. "If North Korea persists in its launch preparations, the United States should immediately make clear its intention to strike and destroy the North Korean Taepodong missile before it can be launched," Carter and Perry [wrote at the time](#). "[T]he risk of continuing inaction in the face of North Korea's race to threaten this country would be greater."

The situation has changed markedly since Secretary Carter wrote those words. North Korea, for instance, had yet to test a nuclear weapon at the time that op-ed was written. The fact that the Kim dynasty has claimed to have done so on four separate occasions since then is a testament to how dangerous and risky such a preventive attack would be. Pyongyang could respond in any number of ways, from simply speeding up the reconstruction of its destroyed or degraded nuclear program to massing hundreds of thousands of troops along the DMZ line or lobbing conventional armaments towards Seoul. No one in Washington is seriously considering a military option to the latest nuclear test, and for good reason: unless the United States is willing to sacrifice tens of thousands of South Korean and American casualties, a campaign of surgical airstrikes would do more to destabilize a region that is already full of historical animosities.

Whichever course the White House decides to take, the undeniable fact is that the Kim dynasty will continue to be a sharp thorn in the side of U.S. foreign policy well into the next administration.