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North Korea Ignores ‘International Community,’ Violates UN Resolution — Again!

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Yet again North Korea has angered “the world.” Pyongyang recently violated another United Nations ban, launching a satellite into orbit. The Japanese UN ambassador spoke of “outrage” on the Security Council. Washington led the campaign to sanction the North.

Announced UN Ambassador Samantha Power: “The accelerated development of North Korea’s nuclear and ballistic missile program poses a serious threat to international peace and security—to the peace and security not just of North Korea’s neighbors, but the peace and security of the entire world.”

The Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is a bad actor. It is hard to imagine anyone — certainly its neighbors, but also the U.S. — looking with favor on further enhancements to the DPRK’s weapons arsenal.

Yet inflating the North Korean threat also doesn’t serve America’s interests. The U.S. has the most powerful military on earth, including 7100 nuclear warheads and almost 800 ICBMs/SLBMs/nuclear-capable bombers. Absent evidence of a suicidal impulse in Pyongyang, there’s little reason for Washington to fear a North Korean attack. And members of the Kim dynasty long have wanted their virgins in this world, not the next.

Moreover, the North is surrounded by nations with nuclear weapons (China, Russia) and missiles (those two plus Japan and South Korea). Even if the Kim Jong-un regime was a more normal authoritarian system, it would have no reason to respect the fundamental hypocrisy of a nonproliferation system enforced by existing nuclear powers. As a “shrimp among whales,” any Korean government could reasonably desire to possess the ultimate weapon.

Finally, Pyongyang apparently sent up a satellite. Of course, there is good reason to suspect that Pyongyang’s launch was really a missile test. (The two are different: a rocket only goes up, while a missile must also come down under control.) However, the DPRK can claim legitimate reasons

for sending a satellite into orbit: “It must be very frustrating, and frightening, for the generals in Pyongyang to know that the enemy can see what they are up to, but they can’t reciprocate,” wrote NK News’ Tim Beal. He noted that even Laos wanted its own satellite. North Korea at least can claim as justification something more than antagonism toward the rest of the world.

Under such circumstances, allied complaints about the North Korean test sounded an awful lot like whining. For two decades U.S. presidents have said that Pyongyang cannot be allowed to develop nuclear weapons. It has done so. Assertions that the DPRK cannot be allowed to deploy ICBMs sound no more credible.

After all, the UN Security Council took its time drafting new sanctions after the January nuclear test. While China agreed that a response was necessary, it insisted that any new measures not destabilize the peninsula. Which means they will not threaten the Kim regime’s survival. Yet only that offers any chance of inducing Pyongyang to desist.

Even so, the North is unlikely to yield. So far Pyongyang appears to have taken the measure of its large neighbor. After the purported satellite launch, the Chinese foreign ministry explained that it was “extremely concerned” and urged the North to exercise “restraint.” Yet the Kim regime announced its satellite launch on the same day that it reported the visit of Chinese envoy Wu Dawei, who handles Korean affairs. When he returned to Beijing he told reporters that he had “said what must be said, did what must be done.” The trip appeared to result in another insulting rebuff for Beijing, dramatic evidence of China’s impotence in the face of North Korean intransigence.

Despite U.S. criticism, the People’s Republic of China has reason to fear disintegration of the North Korean regime: loss of political influence and economic investments, possible mass refugee flows, violent factional combat, and loose nukes, and creation of a reunified Korea hosting American troops on China’s border. Moreover, Beijing blames the U.S. for creating the hostile security environment which encourages the North to develop WMDs. Why should Beijing sacrifice its interests to solve a problem of its chief global adversary’s making? So far Washington has failed to convince Beijing to act.

Thus, the U.S. and its allies have no better alternatives in dealing with Pyongyang today than they did last month after the nuclear test and before that after the rest of North Korea’s many provocations. War would be foolhardy, sanctions are a dead-end, and China remains unpersuaded.

The only alternative that remains is some form of engagement with the DPRK. After all, the North appears to desire such contact. Cho Han-bum of the Korea Institute for National Unification argued that the North was attempting to force talks with America. Pyongyang originally stated that it planned its missile launch between February 8th and 25th, “Which indicates their intent to create a negotiating environment.” However, Washington showed no interest in negotiation, so the DPRK launched.

Of course, no one should bet on negotiating away North Korea's weapons. If nothing else, Pyongyang watched American and European governments oust Libya's Moammar Khadafy after, in its view, at least, he foolishly traded away his nuclear weapons and missiles. Nevertheless, there are things which the North wants, such as direct talks with America, a peace treaty, and economic assistance. Moreover, the DPRK, rather like Burma's reforming military regime, appears to desire to reduce its reliance on Beijing. This creates an opportunity for the U.S. and its allies.

Perhaps negotiation would temper the North's worst excesses. Perhaps engagement would encourage domestic reforms. Perhaps a U.S. initiative would spur greater Chinese pressure on Pyongyang. Perhaps not. But current policy has failed.

Yet again the North has misbehaved. Yet again the allies are talking tough.

Samantha Power insisted that "we cannot and will not allow" the North to develop "nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missiles." State Department spokesman John Kirby said the North's "disregard for UN Security Council obligations will not be tolerated." A South Korean official promised "searing consequences" for the North.

However, yet again Washington is only doing what it has done before. Unfortunately, the same policy will yield the same result as before. It is time to try something different.

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