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Stop Ignoring North Korea

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WASHINGTON – Under the Obama administration, U.S. policy toward North Korea largely has devolved into the president sitting in the Oval Office, closing his eyes and hoping the nuclear monsters will go away. Alas, it hasn't worked. Pyongyang has staged its fourth nuclear test.

After the test, Obama seemed to close his eyes and hope that Beijing would make the nuclear monsters go away. Alas, that isn't likely to work either. Announced North Korea's Foreign Ministry: "The U.S. should be accustomed to the status of the DPRK as a nuclear weapons state whether it likes it or not."

The administration's frustration in dealing with North Korea is understandable. Nothing seems to have worked.

In fact, the latest test came amid evidence of warming ties with the People's Republic of China and reports of a possible invitation to Kim Jong Un to visit Beijing. Evidently Pyongyang cares no more about its ally's opinion on the issue than America's.

North Korea remains the land of no good options. Two decades ago, Defense Secretary Ashton Carter helped prepare plans for striking the North's nuclear facilities. However, triggering a second Korean war would be a poor legacy for Obama.

Washington is pressing the U.N. Security Council to approve additional sanctions; the House has passed legislation to impose additional unilateral economic penalties. But the Kims never have let their people's suffering influence policy and so far Beijing, though professing to support a "necessary response" by the United Nations, has refused to apply sufficient pressure to threaten the Kim regime's survival.

If China did so, the U.S., its allies South Korea and Japan, and China all might regret getting what they wished for. An abrupt and violent regime collapse could yield civil disorder, factional combat, loose nukes and refugee tides.

That could lead to Chinese military intervention to stabilize a new, pro-China government in Pyongyang. Then South Korea would face a renewed and likely permanent division of the peninsula.

The administration could continue its “close one’s eyes and hope for the best” approach. Yet that almost certainly means continued North Korean development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles.

The only other alternative? What Beijing has advocated all along: engagement with the North.

Obviously, there’s no guarantee that this approach will work either. Nevertheless, it offers what the North most wants — direct contact with America. The Obama administration’s insistence that Pyongyang take steps toward denuclearization first is a non-starter.

Negotiations also seem essential to winning greater Chinese support in dealing with North Korea. In Beijing’s view the U.S. is responsible for creating a hostile security environment for the North.

China is unlikely to risk its political and economic position in the North as well as the ill consequences of a North Korean implosion if Washington does not do its part. Although Beijing does not want a nuclear North, so far stability appears more important than denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula.

Moreover, negotiations offer the opportunity to resolve subsidiary issues and improve security even short of achieving full denuclearization. There’s no reason to believe that the Kim regime ever will agree to abandon nuclear weapons, but there may be opportunities to cap the nuclear program and limit weapons development. Perhaps there are trade-offs to be made between military exercises in the South and advanced positioning of military units in the North.

An ongoing dialogue, no matter how limited, offers additional opportunities. If Pyongyang is ever going to talk about human rights, it will do so only after it feels more secure.

Nor should the Obama administration leave the problem for the next president. If so, Pyongyang will be another year along in its nuclear development.

Moreover, a Republican successor to Obama — certainly as possible as not — would be less inclined to give diplomacy a chance. But a new Republican president might choose prudence over rhetoric if a negotiating process was underway.

North Korea’s latest nuclear test is bad news, though hardly a surprise. Indeed, it’s probably the inevitable outcome of a policy which continues to confront Pyongyang militarily without engaging it diplomatically. If Washington wants a different result, it will have to employ a different approach. Which means engagement.

Doing so still might not make the North’s nuclear monsters go away. Nevertheless, the lesson of Pyongyang’s latest nuclear test is that talking to North Korea offers a better hope of success than ignoring it. But then, that’s what Beijing has been telling the U.S. for a long time.

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