



How America Should Respond to North Korea in 5 Steps

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As Washington debates how best to respond to North Korea's fourth nuclear test, it is worth remembering that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea has been a troublesome actor since its formation in 1948. In that year the Soviet Union placed a young anti-Japanese guerrilla, Kim Il-sung, in charge of what had been its occupation zone on the Korean peninsula after Japan's surrender. Kim turned his new nation into another Communist dictatorship and talked his mentor, Joseph Stalin, into supporting reunification by conquest. After Washington intervened, only massive Chinese support saved his regime, but he rebounded during the Cold War, eliminating all domestic opposition, playing Moscow and Beijing against each other, and keeping the inter-Korean conflict unpleasantly warm.

Kim's son and grandson have since turned the regime into a monarchy, with Communist characteristics. The most significant shared legacy may be a nuclear weapons program, which continues to unsettle the region. Although Western intelligence widely disbelieves the DPRK's claim to have tested a thermonuclear device, or H-bomb, Kim Jong-un has clearly demonstrated that nothing—Chinese objections, talks with South Korea, ongoing economic reform—will dissuade the regime from expanding and improving its nuclear arsenal.

Unsurprisingly, the North's action has led to widespread wailing, as well as demands for action. Secretary of State John Kerry declared: "We do not and will not accept North Korea as a nuclear armed state." Alas, no one, least of all the Republican presidential contenders, has good ideas about what to do. But a gaggle of politicians, public officials, analysts and journalists are sure someone must do something.

Of course, Pyongyang again ignored "the international community" because "the international community" has no cost-effective means to restrain the DPRK. Although as assistant secretary of defense Ashton Carter advocated military strikes against North Korean nuclear facilities, most people on and off the Korean peninsula don't believe the answer to a potential war is to start an almost certain war. The costs, especially to the Korean people on both sides of the Demilitarized Zone, likely would be horrific.

Sanctions long have been the West's go-to answer, and House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Ed Royce insisted that "the answer to North Korea's threats is more pressure, not

less.” Congress already was considering three different enhanced sanctions bills before Pyongyang’s test. Moreover, the UN Security Council “strongly” condemned the test and is planning new economic penalties.

But the North has never let public hardship get in the way of its political objectives. The regime survived the starvation death of a half million or more people in a famine almost two decades ago. Mere privation won’t change Pyongyang’s policy and so far the People’s Republic of China has refused to encourage regime collapse by cutting economic ties and eliminating energy and food support. Moreover, Russia, with a newly revived relationship with the DPRK, insisted that any response be “appropriate” and “proportionate.”

Whether there ever was a chance to negotiate away the North’s nascent nuclear program may be impossible to know. But virtually no one believes the Kim regime is willing to eliminate existing weapons developed at high cost. There may be a deal to strike, such as limiting future nuclear activities. But diplomacy isn’t going to make the peninsula nuclear-free.

So what to do?

1) Recognize that not every problem is America’s problem. North Korea matters a lot more to its neighbors than to the United States. Indeed, Pyongyang wouldn’t much care about America, and certainly wouldn’t be constantly tossing imprecations and threats toward Washington if the United States didn’t have troops on its border and abundant air and naval forces pointed the DPRK’s way.

2) Withdraw American conventional forces from the peninsula. The Republic of Korea, with twice the population and upwards of forty times the economic strength of the North, is well able to provide for its own defense. U.S. troops act as nuclear hostages, unnecessarily put in harm’s way without constraining North Korean nuclear activities. To the contrary, to the extent that Pyongyang genuinely feels threatened, such a presence encourages creation of a survivable deterrent.

3) Seek to persuade Beijing to pressure the North out of the former’s own interest. The PRC won’t attempt to break the North Korean government out of solidarity with America. Washington’s only chance of enlisting China’s help is by addressing the latter’s concerns— impact of potentially violent implosion spurring conflict and refugees across the Yalu, loss of economically advantageous position in the North, creation of united Korea allied with America aiding Washington efforts at containment. This requires negotiating with the PRC, not lecturing Chinese officials.

4) Give North Korea the respect it craves and offer to establish diplomatic relations. Refusing to talk to Pyongyang achieves nothing. Engagement might not change anything, but then, we can be certain that nothing will change if we maintain the same policy toward the North. Even a small diplomatic post would offer at least some insight into today’s Hermit Kingdom.

5) Indicate that continuing expansion of North Korea’s nuclear arsenal would force Washington to reconsider its position on proliferation. After all, the United States does not want to be left extending a nuclear umbrella over South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, Australia and who knows else against nuclear-armed North Korea, China and Russia. Better to extricate America from such a

miasma and allow its allies to create their own nuclear deterrents. They likely would respond. For instance, three years ago South Korean President Park Geun-hye declared: “It would be difficult to prevent a nuclear domino from occurring in this area” if the North made another nuclear test. If that prospect bothers the PRC, then it should do more to prevent the DPRK from continuing its present course.

North Korea has become a seemingly insoluble problem for Washington. Nothing the United States can do, at least at reasonable cost, is likely to create a democratic, friendly, non-nuclear DPRK. But Washington can share the nightmare, turning South Korea’s defense over to Seoul and nuclear proliferation over to the North’s neighbors, particularly China. Moreover, Washington can diminish North Korean fear and hostility by establishing diplomatic ties, just as America had official relations with the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies during the Cold War.

The geopolitics still would be messy. But no longer would it be America’s responsibility to clean up.

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