



Contributors

[Comments](#) 4 | [Recommend](#)  0

Doug Bandow: U.S. should get out of Korean peninsula

01:00 AM EDT on Monday, November 1, 2010

By Doug Bandow

WASHINGTON

North Korea has officially unveiled the youngest son and heir-apparent of “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il. Yet again the impoverished dictatorship has captured the world’s attention.

But the U.S. should leave the problem of dealing with Pyongyang to the North’s neighbors. The so-called Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the world’s first Communist monarchy, poses no threat to America. The DPRK’s economy is a wreck. The North’s military equips under-trained, malnourished soldiers with ancient equipment. One American aircraft carrier has more firepower than the entire North Korean military.

What of Pyongyang’s putative nuclear arsenal? The North probably hasn’t miniaturized any weapons that it might have constructed. North Korea also doesn’t have a missile capable of hitting America, let alone doing so accurately. Moreover, “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il is evil, not stupid. He knows that the U.S. could wipe his nation off the map. He wants his virgins in this life, not the next, and wouldn’t waste his time trying to pass power to his son if he planned self-immolation. Deterrence worked against Joseph Stalin, Mao Zedong and Kim’s father, Kim Il-sung. It will continue to work against Kim Jong-il.

The North poses a greater threat to South Korea, but even here the purported danger is exaggerated. The Republic of Korea is far ahead on most measures of national power. The South’s forces are better trained and its equipment is more capable; Seoul has a much larger army reserve and military industrial base. The ROK has twice the population and upwards of 40 times the gross domestic product the North. Moreover, neither China nor Russia, the North’s traditional allies, would support the DPRK in another war.

Indeed, the South felt so secure that it spent much of the last decade investing in and aiding Pyongyang. The supposedly conservative government in Seoul refused to close the South Korean-run Kaesong industrial park in the North even after the DPRK sank a South Korean warship earlier this year. The ROK also recently restarted aid to North Korea.

If the Seoul government isn’t worried about its national security, then Americans shouldn’t give it much thought. The only reason Washington is so deeply involved in the peninsula’s politics is because of its longstanding security guarantee to the South. America’s 27,000 troops should come home.

The U.S. has another objective: to dissuade the North from building nuclear weapons. But nearly two decades of negotiation appear to be at a dead end. There may be no harm in trying again, but no one should have any illusions about the likelihood of making a deal.

In fact, current politics in Pyongyang works against any negotiated solution. Two years ago Dear Leader Kim suffered a stroke. Being less vigorous physically and weaker politically — who knows how long he will be in charge — Kim is less able to face down the military and bargain away its most important weapon.

The future is even less certain. It took “Great Leader” Kim Il-sung years to move his son, Kim Jong-il, into positions of influence. The latter probably won’t have nearly as much time to do the same with his son, Kim Jong-un. And there are numerous claimants to power: a brother-in-law and sister, two more sons, a motley collection of other family members, and many party and military officials who have been waiting for years for their opportunity to rule. The process could be anything but smooth.

Thus, the next government, irrespective of Kim Jong-un’s status, will probably be weak and divided. No one is likely to push the armed services to give up nuclear weapons.

It is a nasty situation. But why are Americans expected to sort out the mess? Rather than treating North Korea as a U.S. problem, Washington should turn the issue back to Pyongyang’s neighbors. Any map demonstrates that the DPRK is primarily an issue for South Korea, Japan and China, not America. Only the South is vulnerable to a traditional conventional assault, and it is well able to protect itself. Japan is conceivably at risk from a North Korean missile attack, but the government of that wealthy, high-tech society could do far more in its own defense. The North isn’t likely to attack the People’s Republic of China, but any instability emanating from Pyongyang will affect the PRC. American disengagement would force the Chinese government to confront the North Korean “problem.”

America can no longer afford to garrison the world. The Korean peninsula is a good place for the U.S. to again start acting like a republic.

Doug Bandow, an occasional contributor, is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to Ronald Reagan, he is the author or editor of several books, including “Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World .”