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To end North Korea's nuclear push, we must first understand its fears

Doug Bandow says efforts should be made to address the real reasons for Pyongyang's hunger for nuclear weapons, rather than alluding to threats against the 'international community'

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North Korea's Kim Jong-un continues his confrontational course. After Pyongyang conducted its fifth nuclear test last month, US defence secretary Ashton Carter declared it to be a "direct challenge to the entire international community".

But this is complete hooey, to use a technical term. It's about time for the "international community" to stop acting as if there really is an international community. Even more, it's fair to assume that Kim isn't much concerned about what the "international community" thinks, let alone intends to "challenge" it.

Kim, like his father and grandfather before him, has more specific foreign targets in mind.

Why nukes? It's not hard to figure out. First, there's the South Korea-US alliance. Deterring the US is no easy task, especially for the government of an impoverished society; nuclear weapons are about the cheapest, most effective means of doing so. Second, Japan remains distrusted, even hated, by Pyongyang. Also on the North's naughty list, ironically, are its traditional allies, Russia and China.

North Korea began its nuclear programme during the cold war, when it still could theoretically rely on support from both China and the Soviet Union. But North Korea's founder, Kim Il-sung, jealously guarded his regime's independence. Only nuclear weapons would free the North of reliance on its supposed friends.

Moreover, these days, it's not so clear either qualifies as a friend. The Soviet-Pyongyang relationship essentially ruptured after the end of the cold war. Although bilateral ties have rebounded, Russia remains a minor player in Korean affairs.

In contrast, China plays a much larger role in North Korean affairs, and therefore is resented much more in Pyongyang. Beijing pressured all three Kim regimes to reform the economy and abandon the nuclear programme. Pyongyang consistently dismissed its advice, sometimes in humiliating fashion. The two countries might better be referred to as “frenemies” than allies.

North Korea uses its nuclear programme to extort benefits from its neighbours – most notably South Korea, China and Japan – as well as America.

Finally, nukes provide Pyongyang with prestige, perhaps the only sense in which the programme is meant to challenge the “international community”.

If Washington and its allies hope to halt Pyongyang’s nuclear programme, they will have to address the actual purpose of its activities, and not blame it on some mythical attack on the world. Even then, there is little reason to believe that Pyongyang is inclined to yield its existing nuclear weapons under any circumstances.

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