



Another day, another NK nuke test

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It's been at least a couple of weeks since North Korea did anything terribly provocative. So another disruptive event was long overdue. Pyongyang announced its fifth nuclear test. And, as always, the "international community" was shocked and appalled.

Watching the Democratic People's Republic of Korea offers a sense of endless déjà vu. Yet policymakers in America and its allies are notoriously blind to the implications of their many failures. "To be clear, the United States does not, and never will, accept North Korea as a nuclear state," intoned President Barack Obama.

But accept it or not, the North is a nuclear state. Some lessons should be learned from Pyongyang's latest challenge.

1. North Korea isn't going away. In today's globalized, inter-connected world, the North's system of totalitarian, monarchical communism shouldn't exist. Yet the regime persists, despite its failure to assure its people even sufficient food, let alone the many other products taken for granted almost universally by people around the globe.
2. Although the Kim dynasty is under some pressure, nothing yet suggests a dangerous fracturing of critical North Korean interests. For the nomenklatura to turn on the system would risk being swept away in the resulting deluge. South Korea's proximity would make it extraordinarily difficult for an independent North of any sort to survive if the Kim dynasty was toppled.
3. Allied policy toward the DPRK has failed. Successive U.S. presidents have inveighed against a nuclear North Korea and insisted that the North would not be allowed to become a nuclear state. It is one. And its capabilities are growing.
4. There is no obvious answer to the "North Korea" problem. Almost certainly Pyongyang is not willing to negotiate away its nuclear arsenal. Sanctions haven't worked and military action could

trigger a bloody second Korean war. Which leaves Washington policymakers reduced to issuing statements after every new DPRK bad act.

5. China isn't going to rescue the West from its discomfort. Beijing deplored North Korea's latest infraction, but the People's Republic of China is angrier about South Korea's planned deployment of the THAAD anti-missile system. At the moment the PRC fears the consequences of North Korean collapse more than North Korean nuclear weapons.

6. Allied expressions of shock and horror ring hollow. Surely no one is surprised by Pyongyang's latest rejection of the dictates of "the international community." Sounding the alarm after every North Korean nuclear and missile test offers positive reinforcement for the DPRK to do the same again.

7. The U.S., South Korea, and Japan should begin considering life with the DPRK as a serious rather than incipient nuclear state. Little is gained by allied officials promising to ignore reality.

8. A nuclear DPRK does not mean war. No one wants the North to become a nuclear state, but it undoubtedly has multiple objectives for doing so, starting with defense against an alliance including the world's greatest military power, which has proved willing to attack smaller states and impose regime change whenever the Zeitgeist seemingly strikes America's president.

9. The U.S. has different interests than its Northeast Asian allies. Geography forces South Korea and Japan to be concerned about the North. And the DPRK must deal with Seoul and Tokyo. America's involvement is entirely voluntary. Today Washington's military guarantee is more an act of welfare for the ROK than defense of America.

10. As Pyongyang's ability to inflict nuclear pain increases, so does the potential cost to the U.S. of its promise to defend the South. Given South Korea's ability to take over its conventional defense, Washington should bring home its garrison. There is no reason for America to turn its military personnel, unnecessary to guard a nation with 40 times the GDP and twice the population of its northern antagonist, into nuclear hostages.

11. The U.S. must decide whether extended nuclear deterrence makes sense, that is, whether Americans are prepared to sacrifice Los Angeles for Seoul. An alternative would be for South Korea and Japan to threaten to build countervailing nuclear deterrents — which would have the added advantage of encouraging the PRC to act against North Korea.

12. Whoever wins the election must consider a course change. The Obama administration's refusal to talk with the DPRK unless it takes steps toward nuclear disarmament has proved to be a dead-end. Washington needs to open communication channels.

North Korea is well on its way to becoming a serious nuclear power. It is time for a change when it comes to America's dealings with Pyongyang.

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