



Tillerson's flawed theory of deterrence

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Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has been roughly treated by the White House of late. Perhaps that explains his dismissal of the possibility of deterring North Korea, a military midget compared to Joseph Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao Zedong's People's Republic of China.

When asked why it was not possible to contain the far weaker Democratic People's Republic of Korea, he responded: "The difference is that with the past behavior of North Korea, it is clear to us that they would not just use the possession of nuclear weapons as a deterrent. This would become a commercial activity for them."

In fact, the DPRK's past behavior, though atrocious, proves no such thing. Selling conventional weapons is not the same as marketing nuclear technology; dealing with governments is different from supplying non-state actors. And selling nuclear materials is less likely when major powers are alert and target such behavior.

Moreover, North Korea's record is no worse than that of the U.S.S.R. and PRC. Nothing about those murderous dictatorships predisposed them against selling nuclear secrets.

In any case, if Pyongyang is inclined to further proliferate, why hasn't it done so while expanding its arsenal? The DPRK's Kim Jong-un apparently recognizes that some actions would be too dangerous to justify even a generous payoff.

If the administration so fears nuclear sales, its emphasis on sanctions is counterproductive, even reckless. Stepping on the North's economic windpipe forces the Kim regime to take desperate steps to breath. Pursue negotiations with Pyongyang which leave North Korea a less dangerous way to raise revenue and it likely would choose that path.

The secretary's comments look particularly odd given how the U.S. responded to Pakistan's

promiscuous proliferation. Iran and Libya, as well as North Korea, are thought to have benefited from Islamabad's aid. The Bush administration appeared to be more concerned over Islamabad supporting the Taliban than opening an international Nukes-R-Us.

But without giving up its nukes or being bombed Islamabad ended the illicit commerce. Past behavior did not determine the future.

Even so, in this regard the administration still might worry more about the Islamic Republic than North Korea. If the unstable Pakistani state blows up, there will be a mad scramble to grab its nuclear weapons, technology, scientists and more.

"We simply cannot accept a nuclear armed North Korea," announced Secretary Tillerson. But the administration doesn't have realistic means to prevent North Korea from becoming, or, more accurately at this point, remaining a nuclear state.

Pyongyang has consistently denied any interest in negotiating away its nukes. The North has spent too much and come too far to do so. Talks with South Korea won't change that.

Even tougher sanctions aren't likely to change the North's position. China so far has refused to risk creating a failed state and turning a reunified Korea as an American military base by attempting to strangle the DPRK economically. Which leaves military action. Unfortunately, conflicts rarely end up being cakewalks as promised. And none of America's recent opponents possessed WMDs.

It is unlikely the U.S. knows where all of North Korea's nuclear essentials are and can reach everything it locates. Moreover, the threat of retaliation is extremely high.

The result almost certainly would be a serious war in which the DPRK could hit South Korea, Japan, and American possessions such as Guam with missiles carrying biological, chemical and perhaps nuclear weapons. Nukes on Seoul and Tokyo would result in horror unseen since World War II.

Moreover, the political and economic consequences would radiate around the world. The U.S. might find itself hated even by its onetime South Korean and Japanese allies. Causing an unnecessary nuclear war could trigger startling geopolitical realignments, handing China predominance in East Asia.

Containment and deterrence constitute an imperfect strategy. Still, despite some tense moments nuclear deterrence worked remarkably well over the last seven decades.

To plunge into the abyss because war could happen anyway would guarantee untold horror in return for the dubious promise of preventing an even worse future conflict. The administration would be wagering hundreds of thousands or even millions of lives on a geopolitical long shot.

The U.S. can't accept a nuclear North Korea, said Secretary Tillerson. But without risking a catastrophic war, the administration can't stop a nuclear North Korea either. Washington shouldn't blow up the peninsula after helping to keep the peace for more than 64 years.

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