



North Korea's Nuclear Threat Is America's (Not the World's) Problem

Doug Bandow

September 15, 2017

Another day, another North Korean weapons test. Kim Jong-un has made the outrageous mundane, even boring. Unfortunately, Pyongyang has to stage ever bigger and more dramatic stunts to shock “the international community.”

Kim has gotten the attention of not only the Trump administration but the American people. The Chicago Council on Global Affairs found a 15 percent increase over last year, to 75 percent, in the share of Americans who view the North Korean nuclear program as a serious threat. He has an unfavorable rating of 91 percent.

However, Kim might not like their response. The vast majority of Americans want to sanction both the North and Chinese companies which deal with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. Four of ten back airstrikes on the DPRK's nuclear facilities. Despite weariness after 16 years of continuous war, almost three of ten would send U.S. troops for the same purpose. That's about as many as would accept a nuclear North Korea even if it froze its current arsenal.

The popular reaction comes as no surprise. Kim has led a chorus of blood-curdling threats against the U.S. which Americans with little knowledge of the Korean stand-off—and understanding of the likely costs of any war—take seriously. Indeed, Pyongyang indicated that it only intended to threaten the U.S. In August at the ASEAN Regional Forum North Korean Foreign Minister Ri Yong-ho said his nation's nuclear weapons were aimed at America: “We have no intention to use our nuclear arms against any country except the U.S. if it does not join the U.S.'s military actions against the republic.” He dismissed South Korea and even Japan as merely “following the U.S.”

North Korea's narrow focus hasn't stopped the rest of “the international community” from criticizing the North. NATO secretary general Jens Stoltenberg called Pyongyang's actions a “global threat” requiring a “global response” and, of course, insisted that the latter “includes NATO.”

However, the problem is essentially America's alone. The Europeans aren't particularly enthused about defending their neighbors to Europe's east. The alliance certainly isn't going to go to war with the DPRK, no matter what happens. No doubt NATO states will back whatever sanctions are imposed by the UN Security Council, but there negotiations are among Washington, Beijing, and Moscow, not Brussels.

No one else much matters. South America, Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia aren't involved. Even Japan is a practical nullity, despite talk about acquiring the ability to preempt North Korean missiles. And the ROK remains too dependent on Washington to take independent action.

Americans should learn more about what they increasingly want to attack and the likely consequences of doing so. When it comes to who threatens whom, Pyongyang likely feels under siege. It faces South Korea, which won the inter-Korean contest, with around 45 times the economic strength. That, in turn, yielded military potential and international influence.

Allied with the South is the global superpower. Although Seoul's need for an American military shield disappeared years ago, the U.S. maintains bases and troops in the Republic of Korea, and sails its vessels and flies its planes nearby. Moreover, Washington's nuclear threats go back to the Korean War.

Nor does the North likely see America's presence as purely defensive. The Kim regime may be paranoid, but that doesn't mean it doesn't have enemies. When I visited Pyongyang in June officials pointed to Washington's most recent regime change wars. Last month at ASEAN Foreign Minister Ri cited an even longer list of U.S. actions: "While nuclear-armed countries have not been attacked, those who had no nuclear [arms], such as Grenada, Panama, Haiti, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya and Somalia saw their regimes replaced by military invasions and interventions of the U.S."

One can quibble about the specifics of any particular case, but Washington has created a two-tier world in which nuclear weapons appear to be the surest deterrent to American bombing, invasion, and occupation. Perverse incentives resulting from U.S. policy encourage proliferation by precisely those regimes most hostile to America.

Giving countries such as North Korea a reason to build nukes is bad enough. But the Obama administration's Libyan adventure expanded on that lesson. As Pyongyang noted at the time, Moammar Ghaddafi agreed to abandon both his missile and nuclear programs. Then, a few years later, the U.S. and several European states used proxies to take him out. NOT SMART!, President Trump might tweet.

Few shed any tears for the Libyan dictator's demise, but that's not the point. Washington dramatically demonstrated to the world—most notably anyone on the incumbent president's naughty list—that the U.S. cannot be trusted to keep a bargain. Or that deals with America come with lots of lawyerly fine print, including a warning that if you give up your most destructive weapons, Washington may take advantage of your weakness whenever convenient.

So the North's weapons programs are best understood as essentially defensive. Of course, Pyongyang would have no moral qualms about using even nukes in attack. But there is no evidence that Kim or those around him are suicidal. They have concluded, understandably even if wrongly, that regime survival requires a nuclear deterrent to prevent a U.S. attack.

Which suggests a two-part American response.

The first is to try to stop North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles. That would be the best outcome, but there's little reason to expect success. DPRK officials uniformly deny any willingness to trade away their weapons. That could be a negotiating tactic,

but the increasingly frenetic pace of both missile and nuclear tests suggests the Kim regime's determination to develop a workable deterrent while shortening its "window of vulnerability" until a survivable nuclear force is deployed.

The U.S. should pursue sanctions, but not only sanctions. Washington should lower the rhetorical temperature and downplay the threat of military action, which only confirms the Kim dynasty's nuclear commitment. The U.S. should initiate dialogue without first receiving a North Korean commitment to disarm, which won't be forthcoming. American officials should talk with their Chinese counterparts about a longer-term solution to the Korean imbroglio, and how to accommodate Beijing's interests in return for applying greater pressure on its nominal ally. The People's Republic of China wants neither a failed state nor a united Korea allied with America and hosting U.S. troops on its border.

At the same time Washington should remove the target from the American homeland. The *raison d'être* for the U.S.-South Korean alliance long ago disappeared. The ROK has the resources to defend itself and should create whatever forces are necessary to deter a North Korean attack and win any war which might ensue.

Once the North possesses a deliverable nuclear weapon even a conventional Korean conflict would be too dangerous for U.S. involvement. If the DPRK found itself losing, it couldn't count on Chinese intervention for its salvation, as in 1950. But Pyongyang could target the U.S. homeland. And Washington has no geopolitical interests in the Korean peninsula worth nuclear war. The security commitment should end and the troops should come home.

The U.S. also needs to rethink maintenance of a "nuclear umbrella" over the Republic of Korea. Could any American president justify risking Los Angeles and Seattle to protect Seoul? Popular support in South Korea for a countervailing nuclear weapon is on the rise. The possibility of a nuclear-armed ROK might encourage the DPRK to reconsider its refusal to negotiate. The prospect of a South Korean bomb, which could lead to Japanese development of nuclear weapons as well, would have a particularly powerful effect on China, providing even more reason to discourage Pyongyang from its present course.

The North's latest missile test reminds us that the Korean crisis is worsening on an almost daily basis. Unfortunately, the solution remains one of second bests. Washington needs to make protecting the American people its priority. That means avoiding, not accelerating, a nuclear conflict in Northeast Asia.

Doug Bandow is the Senior Fellow and former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan. He is the author of Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World and co-author of The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea.