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Accepting Reality: Living With a Nuclear North Korea

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| [Ted Galen Carpenter](#)^[2]

Hopes are rising once more that the moribund six-party talks will resume and that negotiations will eventually produce an agreement whereby North Korea abandons its nuclear program. The latest cause for optimism came when North Korean leader Kim Jong-il called for a moratorium on the building or testing of nuclear weapons during his summit meeting with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Hopes increased further when Kim [repeated that proposal](#)^[3] during his state visit to China a few days later, and added that his government was prepared to return to the six-party talks “without precondition.”

We’ve been down [this same diplomatic dead-end](#)^[4] so many times it is remarkable that anyone would put much stock in Kim’s latest enticing comments. Even the Obama administration exhibits some skepticism, insisting that Pyongyang must back-up Kim’s words with [constructive actions](#)^[5] before it would be worthwhile to resume the six-party talks.

The sobering reality is that neither the offer of [diplomatic and financial carrots](#)^[6] nor [the threat of isolation](#)^[7] and [diplomatic sticks](#)^[8] will likely deflect Pyongyang from its path toward becoming a full-fledged nuclear weapons power. Even if a new round of talks eventually occurs, it promises to be as sterile as all the previous rounds.

Instead of clinging to the futile hope that North Korea will someday agree to execute a return to nuclear virginity, U.S. officials need to adopt a more realistic course. That new approach would focus on how best to live with nuclear North Korea. (A similar course would be advisable regarding our dealings with Iran.)

The current policy is on a trajectory toward an especially unpleasant and dangerous outcome. Washington has repeatedly warned Pyongyang that it faces growing isolation within the international community unless it relinquishes its nuclear ambitions. But unless China and Russia become willing to impose harsh sanctions on North Korea, Kim’s regime will never be truly isolated, since it gets almost all of its economic assistance from those two countries. And even most hawks in the United States shrink from the prospect of launching military strikes to

take out North Korea's nuclear sites (even assuming that we know the location of all pertinent facilities.)

North Korea seems to have made the entirely reasonable calculation that, for all the bluster, the threats of isolation and other dire consequences are hollow. Kim's government also appears to have concluded that it doesn't have to give up its nuclear program to get all the concessions that policy doves are willing to offer. In other words, Pyongyang's strategy seems to be based on the belief that it can have its nuclear cake and eat it too—that the U.S. and its allies will eventually realize that it is too dangerous not to give an unpredictable nuclear power diplomatic respect and generous economic concessions.

What Pyongyang may not be counting on, though, is the tendency of U.S. leaders to cling to foolish, counterproductive policies. It made no sense to refuse to establish a decent relationship with China after the communist revolution in 1949, but Washington engaged in such recalcitrance for nearly a quarter century. It made no sense to refuse to establish diplomatic relations with Hanoi following the Vietnam War, but Washington persisted in that policy for the next two decades. It makes no sense to try to treat a significant regional player like Iran as a pariah, but U.S. officials continue to do so.

It would be profoundly unwise for the United States to continue trying to isolate a nuclear-armed North Korea, but there is no guarantee that Washington won't go down that dangerous path. To prevent such an undesirable outcome, policy makers need to consider more creative and worthwhile policy options, however unsavory they might seem.

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