



Replacing Washington's failed North Korea policy

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Worries about North Korea's provocative, unpredictable behavior have surged dramatically in the past few months. Pyongyang's repeated tests of ballistic missiles, including an intermediate range missile that flew directly over Japan before splashing down in the western Pacific in late August, are among the most visible sources of the growing worries both in East Asia and the United States.

Reports also circulated throughout the summer that a new North Korean nuclear test was imminent. Those concerns proved true at the beginning of September when Kim Jong-un's regime boasted that it had conducted a test, not of another atomic bomb, but of a far more destructive hydrogen bomb. Moreover, Pyongyang claimed it was a weapon designed to be used on an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). If true, that development would mean that the North's nuclear program has achieved an exponential leap in capability.

It is possible that Pyongyang's assertion is merely a hollow boast, but seismic readings confirmed that the underground blast was five times larger than previous tests. Such data lend credibility to the claim that the device was a hydrogen bomb. The notion that the North has been able to miniaturize the weapon to the point of being a warhead small enough for an ICBM is more doubtful, but it is clear that Pyongyang is making rapid strides in both its nuclear and missile programs.

Throughout the series of crises during the spring and summer, US and allied officials continued to insist that a nuclear-armed North Korea, especially one with a robust delivery system of ballistic missiles, is "unacceptable" and "intolerable." The Trump administration warns that "all options are on the table," implicitly including a preemptive US military strike. Yet the actual policy response to date has varied little from the measures implemented over the past quarter century. The strategy consists of gradually tightening economic sanctions, combined with making unrealistic demands and vague threats if Pyongyang does not agree to return to nuclear virginity and abandon its missile program.

One thing should be extremely clear by now: that strategy has failed miserably. Even the most conservative estimates concede that North Korea probably now has a dozen or so nuclear weapons. Conclusions about the missile program cover a wider range. Analysts who tend to hype the threat contend that the North already is capable of striking America's west coast cities and may be able to reach targets in the rest of the country in (at most) a few years.

More sober analysts argue that the notion of an imminent threat is overblown. They point out that although Pyongyang has tested components of an ICBM, that achievement is hardly the same as a successful test of an entire missile with such range. Moreover, even the more limited tests have been far from flawless. The missile fired over Japan, for example, apparently came apart during the re-entry phase – a defect noted in several previous tests as well.

Nevertheless, there are ample reasons for concern. Pyongyang may not pose a credible military threat to the American homeland today, but it certainly will do so sometime in the next decade or so. Washington needs to abandon its existing, utterly ineffectual, policy and take two important steps to reduce the danger to America. One is to pursue bilateral negotiations and try to achieve a relatively normal relationship with Pyongyang –however repulsive Kim Jong-un’s regime might be. The other step is to begin offloading primary responsibility for containing North Korea to the countries most affected by Pyongyang’s behavior. Those countries are North Korea’s neighbors in East Asia: China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia.

The latter policy shift is especially important. It is more than a little odd that the United States, a nation thousands of miles away, is burdened with primary responsibility for deterring a small, disruptive power. The various East Asian nations have far more at stake, yet they are little more than supporting actors (if not bit players) in this geopolitical drama. That situation needs to change – and change quickly.

Washington should emphasize to all parties that it intends to adopt a more restrained and focused role in East Asia instead of attempting to maintain the primacy that it gained from the shambles that World War II created. Going forward, the major regional powers must step up to maintain stability and manage the security affairs of their neighborhood. Those nations collectively, rather than the United States, should formulate policies that they deem appropriate for handling North Korea.

That is not to say that Washington has no role to play. There are some initiatives that only the United States can take. For example, an official state of war still exists on the Korean Peninsula. Negotiating a formal treaty to replace the 64-year-old armistice requires US participation as one of the parties to that conflict. Pyongyang also insists on diplomatic recognition from the United State — a step that Washington should have taken when the Cold War ended, at the very latest. And only the United States can address Pyongyang’s calls to terminate the annual US-South Korean military exercises or the Kim regime’s demand for an American troop withdrawal from South Korea.

Even the most creative US diplomacy cannot guarantee that North Korea will become a peaceful, cooperative power. But that should not be Washington’s principal policy goal. Instead, the objective should be to reduce America’s risk exposure in an extremely volatile, dangerous region. The United States does have some legitimate security and economic interests in East Asia, but those interests are not so great that the republic should risk a war with North Korea that could easily escalate to a nuclear catastrophe.

The local powers that have far more prominent interests at stake ought to incur those risks. It is well past time for the United States to take its North Korea policy off of autopilot and adopt an entirely new, far more risk-averse, approach.

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