



## Only China can stop North Korea, no matter who wins the White House

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That North Korea has grown exponentially more belligerent during President Obama's tenure is unquestionable. But as his successor will inherit the powder keg on the Korean Peninsula, most experts believe Pyongyang's realization of its nuclear ambition is inevitable, regardless of who occupies the Oval Office.

"Short of war, there's not much anyone can do, other than China," the Cato Institute's Benjamin Friedman said.

In March, the global community slapped the strictest sanctions on North Korea to date, which did not stop Kim Jong-un from conducting his second nuclear test Sept. 9. Experts and U.S. officials agree that China will curb North Korea's nuclear program only if it essentially shuts off Kim's economic lifeline.

Beijing could "shut all that down, and that would really squeeze the North Koreans more than any sanctions that anyone else could impose," Friedman said, noting that China accounts for 70 percent of North Korea's trade and supplies the bulk of its food and energy.

But China doesn't share regional and Western concerns about preventing North Korea from becoming a full nuclear power, Friedman said.

"They are less enamored with sanctions than Western leaders," he said. Additionally, if North Korea's authoritarian government collapses, it could create a major refugee problem for Beijing, he said.

Pyongyang's five nuclear and 57 missile tests since January 2009 have created a cycle of international rebuke followed by more economic sanctions that haven't altered North Korea's behavior nor brought it back to the negotiating table, the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Victor Cha said after the latest test, which corresponded with the G-20 summit in China.

"The international community is locked into a coercive diplomatic response that is ineffective," said Cha, head of CSIS' Korean studies.

"This will leave probably the biggest national security threat to the United States" for the next president, he said. "We're past the point of return."

He noted that achieving nuclear-power status is "enshrined" in North Korea's constitution and is often mentioned by Kim.

North Korea's dramatic increase in testing corresponds with Kim's rise to power after his father, Kim Jong-il, suffered a stroke.

China's reaction to its neighbor's provocation has also become predictable, wrote the Brookings Institution's Michael O'Hanlon.

Beijing halfheartedly toughens its sanctions enforcement at the United States' urging. But North Korea "remains demonstrably unfazed by Western sanctions and is unafraid of Chinese retaliation," he said.

Japan and South Korea can do little more than fret and hope China finally takes the lead, Friedman said. "[There is] very little" that Japan and South Korea could do "that would be effective."

Other than make concessions to China on its controversial claims in the South and East China Seas to prod Beijing to cut off Pyongyang, all that Obama, or his successors, can do is saber rattle, Friedman said.

The U.S. could fly more B-1 bombers over South Korea or have fighter jets run circles around the peninsula and the like, but "I just don't think they'd do any good," Friedman said.

In July, Obama did deploy a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense system to Seoul capable of intercepting North Korean missiles. That actually angered Beijing, which worries the U.S. will gain too much influence in the region.

No one expects Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump to start a second Korean War. Neither has offered a detailed plan for North Korean containment. Trump has only blamed Clinton, suggested arming Tokyo and Seoul with nuclear weapons and made vague comments about doing a "deal" with Pyongyang. Clinton is expected to maintain the status quo.

"Neither candidate has really made statements about North Korea," Cha said. Trump's remarks have been "all over the map," he added.

"This latest test perfectly illustrates that our approach to proliferation won't work over the long run," said Derek Johnson, who leads Global Zero, an advocacy group that pushes for denuclearization.

"We're trapped in a dangerous, reactive cycle of nuclear crisis after nuclear crisis," he said Sept. 9. "The American people deserve to hear how their presidential candidates will break the dangerous nuclear status quo."