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Calm Down About North Korea's Nukes

History shows that nuclear states don't behave more aggressively or coercively.

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On Monday, North Korea once again test-launched ballistic missiles, feeding fears about the erratic regime's progress on nuclear weapons and what it might mean for regional security. But Americans and their Asian allies have good reason to calm their reflexive panic over this issue.

Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program is widely considered to be the most pressing international security issue today. The regime has carried out five nuclear tests since 2006 and has vowed to develop an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) that can deliver a nuclear warhead to U.S. soil.

A senior, if unnamed, Trump administration official told reporters recently that the president believes the "greatest immediate threat" to the U.S. is North Korea and its nuclear program. Last week on CNN, Senator John McCain described it as an "immediate danger," and brought up the prospect of preventive military action because "they don't think like us" — meaning that the North Korean regime is not necessarily averse, the way other countries are, to using nuclear weapons.

To some observers, the fact that North Korea is trying to become a full-fledged nuclear power is evidence enough of its aggressive intentions. Failing to somehow block Pyongyang's path to the bomb, they argue, risks nuclear war with an unstable, irrational, paranoid totalitarian state.

But scholarship counsels that we keep a cool head. Few experts go so far as to suggest that Pyongyang would initiate nuclear war with South Korea or the United States. The North Korean regime would have to be eager to commit national suicide, since such an act of aggression would trigger a retaliatory response that would promise its total destruction. Despite McCain's suggestion, North Korea is just as deterred by nuclear retaliation as was the Soviet Union, or Mao's China.

There is another argument, however, which says that while North Korea is unlikely to start a nuclear war, its burgeoning nuclear arsenal will ultimately allow it to coerce and bully other countries. This argument also holds that nukes can enable states to act more aggressively at the conventional level, since they know others will be deterred from full retaliation.

But that turns out not to be true. In a new book, political scientists Todd S. Sechser and Matthew Fuhrmann argue that nuclear coercion doesn't really work. They analyze multiple data sets of hundreds of historical examples and find that nuclear states don't have more leverage in settling territorial disputes, they don't initiate military challenges more often, they are not more likely to escalate ongoing conflicts, and they are not more likely to successfully blackmail adversaries. In short, nuclear weapons don't give states more coercive ability.

Recent history with North Korea seems to bear this out. In 2013, Pyongyang made a serious attempt at nuclear coercion. Following its third nuclear test, in February of that year, the Kim Jong Un regime threatened to bomb South Korea and the United States with "lighter and smaller nukes." In response, the UN Security Council imposed additional economic sanctions on North Korea, which elicited an even bolder threat: the North unilaterally voided the 1953 armistice and threatened to "exercise the right to a pre-emptive nuclear attack to destroy the strongholds of the aggressors."

Presumably, these threats were aimed at making the menace of Pyongyang's nukes more credible and at coercing the international community to lift the devastating economic sanctions. It didn't work. No one found the threats credible, harsher sanctions were imposed, and joint U.S.-South Korean military exercises proceeded apace.

In reality, nuclear weapons are good for one thing and one thing only: deterrence. North Korea's determination to get the bomb is likely borne out of fear elicited by, among other things, consistent U.S. promises to one day overthrow the regime. Policymakers and think tank reports frequently pose this as an option to settle the 70-year stalemate on the Korean Peninsula. A fully capable North Korean nuclear weapons program would protect Pyongyang from invasion and overthrow, but it wouldn't give them greater leverage against enemies.

This doesn't mean we should all welcome the North Korean bomb. More nuclear weapons in the possession of isolated, risk-acceptant authoritarian regimes is not a good thing. It arguably raises the chances of accident or miscalculation. But it doesn't necessarily mean a more powerful, more aggressive North Korea.

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