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Forgetting Pyongyang

by Doug Bandow

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Nothing seems to upset North Korea more than being ignored. Hence Pyongyang's second nuclear test, punctuated by the separate firing of several short-range missiles.

Although the nuclear test reinforces the North's irresponsible reputation, the blast has little practical importance. North Korea has long been known to be a nuclear state and tested a smaller nuclear device over two years ago. The regime's missile capabilities also are well-known. Moreover, the tests may be tied to internal political considerations. "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke last August, raising questions as to who would be his successor. Although he appears to have recovered, both his ample gut and bouffant hair have thinned noticeably. He has yet to groom anyone to be his heir, as his father did him.

Kim may be attempting to make up for lost time. He recently added his brother-in-law, Jang Song-taek, to the National Defense Commission (NDC), currently the most important fount of state power. Twenty-seven-year-old Kim Jong Un, the youngest of Kim's three sons, is reportedly being prepared for a leadership position. Kim may be flaunting more hard-line international commitments—not only tossing out the six-party process, but also investment accords with South Korea—to solidify military support for his succession plans. In fact, by expanding the NDC's power Kim has enhanced the standing of NDC Vice Chairman General O Kuk Ryol, now seen by many as the regime's *de facto* number two.

In any case, Washington has few options. The U.S. military could flatten every building in the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), but even a short war would be a humanitarian catastrophe and likely would wreck Seoul, South Korea's industrial and political heart. America's top objective should be to avoid, not trigger, a conflict. Today's North Korean regime seems bound to disappear eventually. Better to wait it out, if possible.

Which forces the United States to rely on diplomacy. John Bolton, among others, argues that the North's actions prove that the country is not interested in a negotiated settlement. Yet brinkmanship has always been Pyongyang's favorite *modus operandi*. Kim likely hopes that the tests will move his nation to the top of President Barack Obama's "to do" list, as well as raise the price Kim can charge for his cooperation. A deal certainly is further away—indeed, more unlikely than ever—but is still possible.

Unfortunately, President Obama got off on the wrong track by overstating the danger when he declared that "North Korea's nuclear and ballistic-missile programs pose a great threat to the peace and security of the world." In fact, the DPRK's missiles are no different from those possessed by a number of countries, and Pyongyang does not appear to have yet mastered the nuclear-weaponization process, let alone the miniaturization procedure necessary to marry warhead and missile.

Instead, Washington should treat the North's latest actions as an opportunity to reprogram the latter's negotiating formula. The United States should not reward Kim with a plethora of statements beseeching the regime to cooperate and threatening dire consequences for its bad behavior. A Russian official correctly warned against a "hysterical" response. North Korea undoubtedly is

gratified at becoming the center of international attention. America, South Korea and Japan all have had to focus on what otherwise would be an impoverished, starving and irrelevant political backwater.

Similarly mistaken was the emergency UN Security Council meeting. There was no emergency: the North Korean tests changed nothing and threatened no one. True, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton “stressed the importance of a strong, unified approach to this threat to international peace and security,” said Department spokesman Ian Kelly, but then, the secretary took the same position last month after the North’s long-range missile test. Then, after a week of meetings, the Security Council came up with a nonbinding statement urging members to really enforce the sanctions previously approved. That likely caused more contempt than fear in Pyongyang. A repeat will do neither America nor its friends any good.

Nor is it obvious that tighter sanctions would work very well. A regime that has allowed at least a half million, and perhaps more, of its citizens to starve is not likely to worry about its people suffering further hardship. Perhaps the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which supplies much of the North’s food and fuel, could bring the Kim regime to heel. But maybe not.

Anyway, thus far the PRC has worried more about the consequences of a North Korean economic collapse than a North Korean nuclear weapon. Beijing said that it “is resolutely opposed to the test,” but whether that means it is willing to adopt a tougher stance toward the DPRK remains to be seen. Senator John McCain has already called on China to put more pressure on the North and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi plans on raising the issue during her current visit to Beijing. Bruce Klingner of the Heritage Foundation even argues that far from praising the PRC for its aid, the United States should criticize Beijing’s “obstructionism to carrying out the will of the international community as expressed in two U.N. resolutions.”

It is easy for the United States and other states to dismiss China’s concerns. However, imagine how Washington would react if countries a continent away demanded that the United States adopt policies that could wreck Mexico and send millions of starving refugees across America’s southern border. U.S. officials might react less than enthusiastically.

The better hope might be to encourage China to use whatever clandestine influence it possesses over the North to promote internal regime change. Whether the PRC has the ability to do this is an obvious question which even Beijing might not be able to answer with any certainty. The late Kim Il-Sung very effectively wiped out any faction loyal to anyone other than him. But if there is anyone inside the North with the ability and willingness to “solve the problem,” so to speak, now is a good time to act—as Kim’s succession is not yet solidified.

The risks to China are obvious: a new regime might prove no better even if a coup was successful. Failure would harm the Chinese-North Korean relationship, but there is little love between the two governments today anyway and Pyongyang could ill afford to refuse the aid it presently receives. As my colleague Ted Galen Carpenter has pointed out, the Obama administration could reassure Beijing that the United States would not take geopolitical advantage of any resulting turmoil in the North or seek to reunify the peninsula. There would be no NATO-like advance to the PRC’s borders; to the contrary, U.S. forces would come home from the South. And if the result of Chinese efforts was collapse and a refugee flood across the Yalu, Washington would be prepared to help financially.

Assuming no Chinese *deus ex machina* appears, the administration will be left with diplomacy. The Obama administration should explain that the United States is interested in forging a more positive relationship with North. In fact, progress—such as direct talks and perhaps even diplomatic relations—is possible without agreement on the nuclear issue. But no improvement will be possible so long as North Korea flouts American concerns.

Washington should encourage South Korea and Japan to take a similar stance. Multilateral discussions through the six-party talks are worth reviving, if possible, but should not inhibit both formal and informal bilateral discussions. But these should happen only if Pyongyang reciprocates.

Additional provocations by the DPRK in the future should elicit bored contempt rather than excited concern. If the North is determined to isolate itself, then there is little its neighbors can do. If the North decides to shut down the quasi-capitalist Kaesong industrial complex, so be it. There should be no generous last minute deals while Pyongyang is violating past commitments. Equally important, the United States should step back and suggest that Beijing, Seoul and Tokyo take the lead in dealing with the DPRK. North Korea is years away from possessing missiles capable of accurately targeting the United States. Moreover, the North would never strike: Kim Jong-il wants his virgins in today's life, not the afterlife, and knows that America really could turn his entire country into the "lake of fire," as his regime once threatened to do to the South.

More worrisome is the prospect of proliferation, but Pyongyang could hardly be a greater problem in this regard than our ally Pakistan has been. Washington should make clear to the North that sales to non-state actors would be a *casus belli*; no amount of money received would be worth the resulting risk. Especially since engagement would create increased financial opportunities elsewhere.

However, North Korea's activities do threaten its neighbors. Although Russia's relations with Pyongyang have warmed a bit recently, Moscow would not like a nuclear-armed North Korea on its border. Even Beijing, the North's long-time ally, long ago lost patience with Kim's belligerent behavior and might be willing to adopt a tougher policy.

To encourage the PRC to take a more active role, the Obama administration should share America's nightmare scenario with the Chinese. Secretary of State Clinton should have a private chat with Chinese officials, indicating that if the DPRK builds a nuclear arsenal, the United States is not inclined to remain in the middle, maintaining a nuclear umbrella over Pyongyang's neighbors. While Washington might not affirmatively favor a decision by South Korea and Japan to exercise the nuclear option, the United States would not likely prevent them from doing so. Thus it really would be in the PRC's interest to help halt the North Korean nuclear program. The goal, of course, would not be to encourage proliferation, but to use the threat of proliferation to help roll back the DPRK's program.

Pyongyang seems unlikely to ever give up its nuclear capability, but it may still be willing to bargain away future nuclear production. Washington should retain the former as its formal goal, but focus policy on achieving the latter.

The DPRK's latest nuclear test further demonstrates that North Korea is a problem likely to long be with us. The administration should recognize the limitations inherent to any policy towards the North. Washington should offer the prospect of improved relations as a reward for improved North Korean behavior, but should let the North's neighbors, most notably China, take the lead in managing this most difficult of states. North Korea is a nightmare, but a far worse one for other nations than America.

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