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# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Ignore North Korea's Temper Tantrums

Doug Bandow - December 6, 2012

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North Korea announced that it plans another rocket launch this month. The South Korean and U.S. governments rushed to denounce Pyongyang. In the future, both should ignore the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK).

The DPRK's possible motives are many: To reclaim its reputation soiled by the failed rocket launch in April. To pump up nationalistic feelings around the anniversary of "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il's death. To enhance the leadership credentials of "Great Successor" Kim Jong-un. To influence the upcoming presidential election in South Korea. To pressure Washington to offer a deal.

State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland denounced the launch as "a highly provocative act that threatens peace and security in the region." Seoul expressed "serious concern" and called the plan a "grave provocation." But neither nation could do anything more than "consult" with other nations. One unnamed South Korean official admitted: "At the moment, we don't have much tools or leverage to prevent them from making further provocations."

No doubt Pyongyang is pleased. It again has unsettled its leading adversaries. And it is in the news around the world.

The allies should have responded with a collective yawn. After all, the plan is nothing new. The DPRK has been testing rockets and missiles for years. Moreover, the North routinely resorts to brinkmanship. The world looks no different after Kim regime's announcement than before.

Moreover, North Korea may be setting itself up for embarrassment. Its April launch was a grand failure, with the rocket disintegrating shortly after take-off. Rather than demonstrate the regime's great power, the latest effort could reinforce Pyongyang's image of irrelevance.

Instead of complaining, the United States should note its continuing interest in better relations with the North, but unwillingness to reward the DPRK's militaristic excesses. Should the Kim regime desire better relations, Washington's door remains open, but relations won't move forward without a period of quiet and responsible action in Pyongyang.

Then the administration should change the subject, noting that far more important issues are afoot in East Asia: new rulers in Beijing, resolution of territorial disputes in the South China Sea, political reform in Burma, and much more. The idea of wasting time and effort engaging North Korea is so, well, yesterday.

Moreover, the Obama administration should use the planned launch to engage the People's Republic of China over the many problems created by the DPRK. The point is not to demand and hector, but to listen and persuade. With a new leadership in Beijing, Chinese policy may be open to change. Especially since Pyongyang appears to have dramatically dissed its closest (and pretty much only) ally.

North Korea announced its planned launch only a day after Kim Jong-un met with a Chinese delegation which included a new politburo member. President Xi Jinping had been on the job barely a week. The visitors might have been hoping to persuade the North not to launch. If so, Pyongyang again will have demonstrated that it takes China's support for granted. Beijing's official response was to call on "all sides" to promote peace.

Washington should point out to the PRC that the latest launch demonstrates that the peninsula is unstable, with the DPRK ever ready to challenge its neighbors.

The chance of conflict growing out of incidents like the North's sinking of a South Korean ship and bombardment of a South Korean island in 2010 remains very real. Beijing would be a major loser if war erupted.

Moreover, as long as the North remains a closed, monarchical, communist state with a failed Stalinist economy, collapse is possible. What China most fears—refugees, civil war, South Korean and even U.S. intervention—then could become a reality. The PRC would lose its ally without being able to help shape events to protect its geopolitical interests.

Then Washington should suggest its willingness to work with Beijing if the latter pressed North Korea to make fundamental reforms. America—and hopefully South Korea and Japan as well—would assist in caring for any refugees, promise not to station troops in a reunited Korea, and highlight China's positive contribution to regional stability. The objective would be to convince the PRC that it is in the latter's interest to try to transform the political system in the North.

As an added inducement, the Obama administration should announce its unilateral renunciation of the bilateral treaty restricting the range and payload of South Korean missiles. Washington recently renegotiated the agreement, but it makes no sense to limit the ROK when Pyongyang continues its missile and nuclear development. If China feels uncomfortable as a result, so much the better.

Indeed, the U.S. should start playing poker, noting that it makes little sense for America to pressure its allies, most notably South Korea and Japan, not to build nuclear weapons if Beijing won't put meaningful pressure on the latter's close ally to do the same. It is not obviously in America's interest to ensure that only potential adversaries and rogue regimes in East Asia have nuclear weapons. If the PRC wants to prevent a debate in Washington over what to do if the North moves ahead and builds a growing nuclear arsenal, China should take action now.

There may be no less rewarding international exercise than engaging North Korea. Instead of paying attention to Pyongyang, the U.S. government should exhibit indifference. Expressing outrage merely encourages the DPRK to follow the same strategy again and again.

Moreover, what appears to be a calculated insult to China by Pyongyang provides the Obama administration with an opportunity to engage the PRC over policy toward the North. If there is hope for change in North Korea, it is most likely to come through China. Washington should use every new DPRK provocation to help convince Beijing why acting is in the latter's interest as well.

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