

# THE NATIONAL INTEREST

## Same Old North Korea

By: Doug Bandow – January 29, 2013

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North Korea's "Dear Leader," Kim Jong-il, has been dead for more than a year, but his policies live on under his son, Kim Jong-un. Despite cosmetic changes—an attractive first lady carrying a designer purse—economic reform appears to remain mostly talk and political adjustments only affect the internal balance of power. Now the "Great Successor" is continuing his father's policy of provocation, threatening to stage another nuclear test.

The official rhetoric also remains characteristic of the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea. The National Defense Commission explained: "We are not disguising the fact that the various satellites and long-range rockets we will launch, as well as the high-level nuclear test we will carry out, are targeted at the United States, the arch-enemy of the Korean people." Moreover, "Settling accounts with the U.S. needs to be done with force, not with words."

Although Pyongyang gave no specifics on its planned test, mid-February seems likely. That would mark Kim Jong-il's birthday and preempt the inauguration of Park Geun-hye as South Korea's new president.

So far the Obama administration's reaction has been muted. Administration special envoy Glyn Davies was visiting Seoul and said: "We hope they don't do it, we call on them not to do it. It would be a mistake and a missed opportunity if they were to do it. This is not a moment to increase tensions on the Korean peninsula." White House press secretary Jay Carney denounced the North's rhetoric as "needlessly provocative."

Of course, the DPRK believes there never is a moment when it is not appropriate to increase tensions on the peninsula. And North Korean foreign policy is based on provocation.

Washington's response should remain low-key. First, the administration should downplay the test's significance, observing that it is nothing new. The North already has conducted two tests. Although no one wants Pyongyang to advance its nuclear program, the test will offer useful intelligence on the North's progress.

Anyway, no amount of threatening, pleading, or whining will get Pyongyang to back down. To the contrary, the greater the reaction in Seoul, Tokyo and Washington, the greater will be the Kim regime's commitment to testing. One of the most important reasons that the North conducts these tests is to upset its adversaries.

Largely ignoring the event would reduce the DPRK's reward. That won't likely turn the Kim regime into a responsible international citizen. But it might reduce Pyongyang's enthusiasm for scheduling a future test.

Second, the United States should not push for renewal of the Six Party talks. The North announced that it would not surrender its nuclear weapons until "the denuclearization of the world is realized." This may well be yet another negotiating ploy. However, Washington and its allies should take it seriously.

Instead of begging Pyongyang to return to negotiations and requesting China to make Pyongyang return, the administration should indicate its openness to talks but note that they cannot be effective unless North Korea comes ready to deal. No reward should be offered for the North's return to the table.

Third, the United States should spur its allies to respond with the only currency which the Kim regime likely understands: military strength. Washington has had troops on the peninsula for nearly 63 years, far longer than necessary. That has left the ROK and Japan dependent on America. They should take over responsibility for dealing with the North's military threats.

Washington should unilaterally lift treaty restrictions on the range and payload of South Korea's missiles, a bizarre leftover from Seoul's time as a helpless American ward. The administration also should indicate its willingness to sell whatever weapons might help the ROK and Japan enhance their ability to deter and even preempt a North Korean attack. The changing security environment should cause Japan to formally revise the restrictions placed on military operations by its post-World War II constitution.

Further, the United States should press the newly elected governments in Seoul and Tokyo to confront their difficult past, address ongoing territorial controversies, and cooperate seriously on security. Americans no longer can afford to guarantee the security of populous and prosperous allies the world over. Moreover, the most effective deterrent to further North Korean provocations would be the knowledge that every new threat, test and attack would encourage greater South Korean-Japanese military efforts directed at Pyongyang.

Fourth, the administration should use the North's latest threat as an opportunity to challenge the People's Republic of China over its support for the DPRK. Beijing is visibly tiring of Pyongyang's antics. A debate even has begun, though largely outside of government, over the value of supporting such an ungrateful and unpredictable "ally."

The Chinese government responded to the North's nuclear announcement by calling on all parties to "refrain from action that might escalate the situation," as if the United States, South Korea and Japan were responsible for North Korea's behavior. However, after the North's recent missile test the PRC agreed to a United Nations resolution strengthening economic sanctions against the DPRK. The restrictions—adding additional individuals and organizations to the UN blacklist—were modest, but the Security Council pledged to "take significant action in the event of a further launch or nuclear test." This suggests that Beijing might be willing to do more in the future. The leadership transition in China also creates an opportunity for a change in policy toward the North.

Winning China's assistance won't be easy. Washington must make the case that the current situation is not to Beijing's advantage.

Continuing North Korean missile and nuclear tests raise tensions on the peninsula, encourage the allies to react, and risk dangerous escalation. The North also inadvertently brings together Seoul, Tokyo and Washington, a combination not likely to act in the PRC's interest. The outcome likely will be either a less stable North Korea in which China's interests suffer or a reunited Korean peninsula in which China's interests are disregarded.

Moreover, the United States should work with the ROK and Japan to forge a peace proposal for the North. The allies then should seek China's support for the effort—backed by meaningful economic and political pressure—with the promise not to take geopolitical advantage if the Kim regime resists and collapses as a result. That is, the allied states would help cover the costs of refugees and accept the possibility of Chinese military intervention if the North Korean state dissolved, and forswear the presence of American troops if the Koreans reunified.

Fifth, Washington should begin a well-publicized rethink of nuclear security in Northeast Asia. Today American policy is based on maintaining a nuclear umbrella, which places the United States at risk from Chinese, Russian or North Korean threats against neighboring states. As such, Washington could remain forever entangled in the region's potentially dangerous politics.

This policy advances nonproliferation but at high cost. Indeed, it ensures that the only nuclear armed powers in East Asia will be the least responsible and least democratic ones. Worse, this approach risks the American homeland for interests that are not vital: Should Washington sacrifice Los Angeles to protect Seoul, Tokyo, or Taipei?

The administration should announce that the North's continuing nuclear developments have forced it to reconsider existing policy. Since it is not in America's interest to forever guarantee the nuclear security of its allies, Washington will consider the option of stepping back should South Korea and Japan decide that they need countervailing weapons. No decision need be made at this point, but Beijing should understand that further North Korean provocation may not, say, work to the former's advantage. In essence, it is time to share the nightmare of a nuclear DPRK with the residents of Zhongnanhai. However, if the PRC wants to keep nuclear weapons away from its neighbors, it could do so by keeping them away from the Kim regime.

Through all this the United States should indicate its continuing willingness to talk with the North. As Winston Churchill once observed, "To jaw-jaw is always better than to war-war." That should include a willingness to inaugurate official relations, perhaps with a small consular office. The benefit of a small window in Pyongyang would outweigh any propaganda advantage the DPRK might attempt to gain.

But there should be no offers of aid, no pleas for official negotiations, no hand-wringing over North Korean threats. Washington should treat the North's nuclear program with public indifference, allowing Pyongyang's neighbors to take the lead. However, the administration should issue a private warning against any attempt to turn North Korea into a global Nukes-R-Us, indicating that sales to terrorist groups would be a casus belli risking devastating retaliation and regime elimination.

Otherwise, Washington should indicate that it will view the North as a minor problem child. Only by changing its behavior will Pyongyang be treated seriously by the United States. A genuine change in approach could lead to a formal peace treaty to end the Korean War, full diplomatic relations with America and allied states, the end of bilateral and multilateral economic sanctions, and normal engagement with the rest of the world.

The North's latest announcement merely reinforces what has long been obvious, that Pyongyang remains one of the globe's most malign actors. While regime change is the ultimate solution, especially to North Korea's monstrous violations of human rights, the most important immediate objective is to maintain the peace.