

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

Shoulda Coulda Woulda on North Korea

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Debate over foreign policy is usually far removed from the scientific method, but that doesn't stop many who engage in the debate from drawing strong inferences based on limited data. If the latest policy approach to a problem doesn't bring quick and desirable results, then the conclusion is drawn that the approach is unwise or at least defective. Such conclusions are often employed tendentiously, of course, for the sake of attacking someone else's policies or someone else's administration. But the conclusions, however unjustified they may be, have a couple of more basic sources.

One is a short collective memory, coupled with the tendency to ascribe to incumbents responsibility for whatever problems are preoccupying us at the moment. We see this reflected in the tendency to treat a presidential election as a referendum on how things have been going for the nation lately (more with respect to domestic policy than foreign affairs). It is reflected in the inclination to throw the current bums out, even if the previous bums might not have done any better. This is a general pattern, going well beyond the United States and involving different methods for changing governments. It is exhibited, for

example, in Pakistan, where a pattern of alternating every few years between military and civilian rule continues as Pakistanis periodically get fed up with whoever has been ruling them most recently.

The other source is more peculiarly American: a belief that the right policies ought to be able to solve even the most difficult problems. Americans have a hard time believing, given how successful their nation has been at so many things, that some problems are intractable even for a superpower.

North Korea, and particularly its weapons programs, is an excellent example of an intractable problem. Several aspects of the "hermit kingdom" make it so. At the core of the policy dilemma that North Korea presents to outside powers is its proclivity, which it has honed into an art form, of misbehaving as a way of getting attention and rewards. The trick for outsiders, which is difficult to perform, is to find ways to induce better behavior in the future without rewarding misbehavior of the recent past. The United States does not have the keys to this particular kingdom. If any outside power has the keys, it is China, but Beijing's interests in North Korea only partially parallel those of Washington.

North Korea is about to conduct a rocket launch that it describes as intended only to launch a satellite but that many outside observers say is a disguised test of a long-range ballistic missile with a military mission. There is also talk, especially from the South Koreans, of the North possibly being on the verge of a third underground test of a nuclear weapon. So not surprisingly, and consistent with the usual tendency of inferring that a policy is unwise if it does not bring quick positive results, [critics of the Obama administration charge](#) that its most recent tack on Korea was a mistake. That tack was an agreement reached with Pyongyang two months ago that offered food aid in return for a ban on further tests of nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

The criticism misses several things. Hardly anything was given up in the deal reached in February. The food aid would consist of nutritional supplements that

would be difficult for the regime to divert from the civilian population to the military and that meets a legitimate humanitarian need entirely apart from the weapons issues. Not to have taken this initiative would have missed an opportunity to test North Korean intentions following the leadership succession from Kim Jong-il to Kim Jong-un. A policy of not engaging Pyongyang was tried for several years under the previous administration, without success in preventing North Korea's first nuclear tests. Most important, there is no reason to believe that *not* concluding the agreement would have brought about any better results today. An anonymous senior administration official understandably complained, "There's a lot of 'shoulda, coulda, woulda' now from outsiders."

Those who have more of a right to criticize are ones who are proposing something that has not been tried before and offer analysis on why the alternative they are proposing has a better chance of getting favorable results. [Ted Galen Carpenter did so recently](#) in these spaces in arguing for normal relationships with North Korea and Iran.