

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

U.S. Should Stop Obsessing about North Korea

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Recent [satellite photos](#) indicating that North Korea is upgrading a launch facility has led to a flurry of speculation that Pyongyang may developing a capability to build and test sophisticated, longer-range missiles. There is little doubt that the North Korean regime has such ambitions. Just a few weeks ago, there was [a failed test of a long-range missile](#)—a test that was thinly disguised as an attempt to put a satellite into orbit.

U.S. leaders should take a deep breath and draw two appropriate lessons from the latest photos of heightened activity at the missile site. First, even if North Korea does ultimately develop a new generation of rockets that don't routinely blow up on the launch pad or in flight, that achievement doesn't really change much in terms of a power relationship with the United States. The North Korean leadership would have to be suicidal to use such weapons—especially against the United States. Despite the fevered agitation that has occurred from time to time among politicians and pundits in this country that American cities would be at risk, North Korean leaders know perfectly well that even a pin-prick attack would lead to massive retaliation and the end of their regime. There is not a shred of evidence that members of North Korea's political and military elite are suicidal. That point is equally true of Iran's regime—which makes the argument that Pyongyang or Tehran cannot be deterred [extremely dubious](#).

North Korean leaders undoubtedly enjoy the agitation that their nuclear or missile activities cause in American policy and opinion circles. Consequently, giving such moves an extraordinary amount of attention is the last thing Washington should do. A collective yawn would be a better response, denying Pyongyang the attention that it craves.

The second lesson that U.S. policy makers should draw from the latest development is that it is well past time to turn the North Korea problem over to North Korea's neighbors. It is a perverse distortion of a normal international system that the United States is always expected by the countries of East Asia—and by America's own political leaders—to take primary responsibility for dealing with that troublesome regime. There is no logical reason that America should be more concerned than South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia about North Korea's behavior. Those countries are a lot closer than the United States to any potential trouble from that source. Indeed, absent the obsolete U.S. troop presence in South Korea, there would be little reason for Americans to be more agitated about North Korean trouble making than about the obnoxious behavior of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez.

Unfortunately, Washington has always pushed itself into the forefront of East Asian security matters, thereby incurring unnecessary risks. The most pernicious aspect of that strategy has been to encourage U.S. allies, especially South Korea and Japan, to free ride on America's defense guarantees. That they have happily done. Despite having a nasty, volatile neighbor in Pyongyang, South Korea spends an anemic 2.5 percent of its gross domestic product on defense. Japan spends barely one percent, and despite occasional assertive rhetoric, Tokyo shows few signs of taking responsibility for its own defense, much less the security and stability of its region. Part of the problem is laziness and exploitive behavior on the part of security clients who have become accustomed to a generous American defense subsidy over the decades. But Washington also bears heavy responsibility for fostering—indeed, even insisting upon—such dependency. It is especially troubling, for example, that the U.S. government has persisted in limiting the range of South Korea's missiles and placing other foolish, counterproductive restrictions on Seoul's military.

A new policy is long overdue, and the latest concerns about North Korea ought to serve as a catalyst for change. Washington should make it clear to its East Asian allies—and to China and Russia—that the United States expects those countries to take the lead in dealing with North Korea or any other security problems in their region. And U.S. leaders should back-up such a declaration with substantive action—including beginning to withdraw all American ground forces from Japan and South Korea. The days of acting as East Asia's babysitter need to end.