



The Case Against Increased North Korea Sanctions

By: Ted Carpenter - February 21, 2013

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North Korea's latest nuclear test is causing the usual consternation in the international community. The European Union has strengthened economic sanctions against Pyongyang, and the United States and its East Asian allies are calling for a similar response. That is both futile and potentially dangerous.

The futility of sanctions should be readily apparent by now. That approach has been tried for more than two decades without producing the desired results. Throughout that period, Pyongyang's nuclear program has continued to develop at a slow but steady pace. Intelligence reports indicate that North Korea probably now has enough fissile material for several weapons. Last week's test was the third test of a nuclear device, and this one indicated that scientists have made significant progress toward both reducing the size of the device and increasing its explosive capacity.

Both steps are necessary to create effective weapons that can be deployed aboard aircraft or missiles. North Korea's successful launch of a satellite (actually the test of a multistage missile) in December indicates that the country is making progress on developing a weapons-delivery system to accompany its nuclear program. In short, North Korea is on course to become a credible nuclear-weapons power—probably in less than a decade.

The current U.S.-led policy is on a trajectory toward an unpleasant, dangerous destination. Washington has repeatedly warned Pyongyang that it faces increasingly onerous international isolation unless it relinquishes its nuclear ambitions. But as much as the United States and other countries insist that North Korea's choice is a binary one of giving up its nuclear aspirations in exchange for reduced sanctions or facing greater isolation and penalties, North Korea's leaders appear to have concluded otherwise. Pyongyang's conduct suggests that they see no need to give up the nuclear program to get the various benefits that negotiators in the sporadic Six-Party Talks have offered. Their assumption seems to be that North Korea can have its nuclear cake and eat it too.

It is not an irrational expectation. North Korean leaders have reason to wonder whether the United States and its allies would really continue trying to isolate an emerging nuclear weapons power. Indeed, U.S. and East Asian leaders need to reassess whether that policy's risks outweigh

any plausible benefits. The one scenario more dangerous than a North Korea with nuclear weapons is a nuclear-armed North Korea with whom the United States and other major countries have no meaningful relationship. And that's where we are headed.

A surly, increasingly constricted regime, denied options for legitimate economic activity, will be inclined to be even more disruptive than it is now. Washington and its allies need to accept the possibility that it may be too perilous to try to isolate a country that will possess a growing nuclear arsenal instead of according that country diplomatic respect and trying to establish a workable relationship.

It is undoubtedly distasteful and worrisome to accept an odious regime like North Korea's into the global nuclear weapons club. But it is time to face reality, however unpleasant it is. The strategy of trying to isolate that country has not worked, and there is almost no prospect that it will work in the future. North Korea is not about to return to nuclear virginity, and no rational person suggests launching a preemptive war to prevent the country's emergence as a nuclear power. Consequently, we must learn to make the best of a bad situation.