



## On North Korea, Keep Calm and Carry On

By: Ted Galen Carpenter – April 11, 2013

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North Korea has caused more nervousness than usual in the international community in recent weeks. American pundits and political figures have a serious case of the jitters. There is talk by some hawks that the United States needs to consider a show of force.

But cooler heads need to prevail. We should recognize North Korea for what it is: a beggar state with no capability to launch a nuclear attack against the American homeland.

When Pyongyang followed its December 2012 ballistic missile launch with a nuclear test in February, the United States predictably led the charge to impose tighter sanctions in response, and an increasingly annoyed China did not block that effort. Kim Jong Un's regime has since aimed a barrage of shrill threats at the U.S. and South Korea.

The most far-fetched one was that North Korea would attack U.S. cities with "cutting edge" nuclear weapons. More troubling was Pyongyang's renunciation of the 1953 armistice that ended the fighting in the Korean War, though North Korean leaders have issued similar empty declarations before, and the severing of a hotline with South Korea.

This is cause for some concern, but we shouldn't blow the situation out of proportion. The same news media outlets that solemnly intoned that sequestration would strangle the federal government, and who earlier suggested that going over the so-called fiscal cliff would wreak havoc on the entire U.S. economy, are now warning about a dire North Korean threat to American security. The usual hawks in Congress are also demanding action. Senator James Inhofe, R-Okla., declared that the United States needed to have in place "right now" a plan for a preemptive strike on North Korea if the crisis deepened.

But there is little evidence that North Korea poses a threat to the United States. It is unclear whether Pyongyang's embryonic nuclear program has produced even one deployable weapon. It certainly has not produced sophisticated, compact "cutting edge" warheads that can be married to ICBMs.

Nor is the country's missile program likely to be mistaken for those of first-rate military powers. The successful December launch followed several spectacular failures over nearly a decade, and a single successful test is a long way from creating a fleet of reliable missiles.

North Korea's ability to conduct attacks against targets in South Korea and Japan using conventional weapons is more serious, but even that danger hardly warrants the mounting nervousness afflicting U.S. opinion elites. Pyongyang's infantry and artillery forces could likely cause severe damage to South Korea's metropolitan areas – namely Seoul. The antiquated North Korean air force, though, would have little ability to inflict much damage on South Korea, much less on Japan or Guam.

North Korea's limited geographic threat highlights a very important point. Pyongyang may pose a security threat to South Korea and a modest danger to Japan. But if the United States did not foolishly maintain military bases in those two countries – nearly seven decades after World War II, six decades after the Korean War and more than two decades since the end of the Cold War – North Korea's saber-rattling would be of little relevance to Americans.

In a normal international system, Japan and South Korea would be able to (and be expected to) handle an obnoxious neighbor like North Korea. But both countries have instead chosen to free-ride on U.S. security guarantees for decades. That has created an unhealthy situation on both sides.

If Tokyo and Seoul truly regard North Korea as a menace, they would be wise to create more robust defenses of their own. Yet South Korea spends a mere 2.6 percent of its gross domestic product on the military, while Japan is just now considering lifting the self-imposed limit that has that country spending a pathetic 1 percent on defense.

Someday the United States may confront the reality of a North Korea possessing both a nuclear arsenal and reliable, long-range delivery systems. But that is not the situation today. American policy makers and opinion leaders should avoid acting like Chicken Little assuming that the sky is falling. The danger of an attack on the U.S. homeland is minuscule. North Korea's leaders are thuggish and weird, but they are not suicidal – even if they had the capability to launch such an attack.

Instead of worrying about an improbable, suicidal North Korean assault on the United States, U.S. leaders should avoid measures that might convince Pyongyang that Washington is pursuing a forcible regime-change strategy. Moves such as the "fly over" of South Korea by B-2 bombers during the recent joint military exercises with Seoul or the subsequent deployment of F-22 fighters could cause that perception, lead to a miscalculation, and perhaps trigger a war that no one – not even the North Korean regime – wants. Now is the time for caution, not panic mongering or military posturing.