

The Washington Post

Learn to live with a nuclear North Korea

By: Ted Galen Carpenter - February 14, 2013

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After North Korea’s nuclear test Tuesday, the West’s reaction has been as predictable as it will be ineffective: lots of hand-wringing, calls for more sanctions, warnings of vague consequences if North Korea continues to violate U.N. resolutions. As President Obama said in his State of the Union address, the North Koreans’ provocations “will only further isolate them, as we stand by our allies, strengthen our own missile defense and lead the world in taking firm action in response to these threats.”

Unfortunately, none of these actions will curb Pyongyang’s nuclear ambitions.

For years, we’ve tried carrots and, more often, sticks with the Hermit Kingdom, to little avail. Even the 1994 agreement between Washington and Pyongyang that temporarily froze Kim Jong Il’s plutonium program did not really constrain the regime — it merely shifted to a parallel uranium-enrichment program. And North Korea has conducted two previous nuclear tests, in 2006 and 2009.

It’s time for a new approach. After all, the only thing more dangerous than a North Korea with nuclear weapons is a nuclear-armed North Korea with which the United States has no productive relationship. The nation might become a supermarket for nuclear technology, weapons components and even fully assembled nuclear weapons, available to any purchaser. Washington and its allies need to accept that it may be too dangerous to try to isolate a nuclear power instead of trying to establish a constructive relationship.

In a scenario with no good options, we may have to learn to live with a nuclear-armed North Korea.

Rescinding sanctions would not be a huge loss. Those measures have impeded North Korea’s access to technology, interfered with whatever meager trade its pathetic economy generates and crippled the country’s participation in the international financial system. They have caused considerable pain to ordinary North Koreans — famine and cannibalism are not unheard of — but have merely inconvenienced the regime.

Washington has repeatedly warned Pyongyang that it faces growing international isolation unless it relinquishes its nuclear ambitions. But that ultimatum lacks credibility, because everyone knows that unless China imposes harsh sanctions, North Korea will never be truly isolated. The nation gets extensive economic assistance, including much of its food and energy,

from Beijing. And Chinese officials are not willing to turn their backs on a long-standing ally, a buffer between China and a U.S.-led East Asia. North Korea knows it, too, and has essentially called our bluff.

Hawks will cry, “Appeasement!” But we can’t lose perspective. North Korea’s embryonic nuclear arsenal and slowly improving missile capabilities cannot directly menace the American homeland. The United States has thousands of sophisticated nuclear warheads that are generations ahead of anything the North can muster. Pyongyang’s leaders would have to be suicidal to assault the United States. Although members of North Korea’s elite are brutal and ruthless, they aren’t that crazy. What strategists call “primary deterrence,” or preventing an attack on U.S. shores, remains as effective and credible as ever.

The credibility of “extended deterrence” — Washington’s ability to threaten devastation of an adversary that menaces any U.S. ally — is more problematic. Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and North Korea’s other neighbors worry that the United States might hesitate to confront a nuclear-armed foe over a threat that’s confined to their countries. That concern is legitimate, but the logical response is to develop or strengthen their own deterrents, nuclear or not, instead of relying so heavily on U.S. security guarantees. Although an arms race in the region is not appealing, it may be the most realistic, effective response to Kim Jong Eun’s heated rhetoric.

North Korea clearly sees no benefit to engaging seriously in six-party talks with China, the United States, Russia, Japan and the South. Those talks went on intermittently between 2003 and 2009, generating false hope of a settlement while North Korean negotiators stalled, indicating that they might give up their nukes if enough financial aid and other benefits were offered. But as the talks droned on, Pyongyang continued its nuclear program. Since April 2009, the negotiations have stagnated. Meanwhile, Seoul and Pyongyang engage in tit-for-tat provocations, from competing military maneuvers to rabid propaganda campaigns. Tensions on the Korean Peninsula are higher than they have been in many years.

A new relationship with North Korea is imperative, and the United States must take the first step. In the 1980s, some in the State Department proposed that Beijing and Moscow recognize South Korea while Washington recognize North Korea. With the end of the Cold War, China and Russia did establish robust diplomatic and economic ties with Seoul. Still, we refused to normalize relations with Pyongyang.

Washington should belatedly take that step. In addition, we should enter into serious negotiations with North Korea, China and South Korea to sign a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War. Such a treaty, a long-standing North Korean demand, would pave the way for reduced military deployments on both sides of the ironically named Demilitarized Zone between the North and the South. Finally, U.S. leaders should reverse course on economic sanctions, ending most unilateral measures — which bar virtually all economic contact except for U.S. humanitarian aid — and leading, together with Beijing, an effort to roll back multilateral sanctions. The ultimate goal should be to give North Korea a stake in behaving responsibly as a nuclear power.

No doubt, this will be difficult. The oppressive regime may be the most odious government on the planet, with a horrific human rights record. But isolating the country clearly has not worked. North Korea is not about to return voluntarily to nuclear zero. Short of launching airstrikes against all known and suspected nuclear sites — a move almost no serious analyst recommends, since it would risk triggering a full-scale war in East Asia — there is no effective way to compel Pyongyang to abandon its weapons program.

Washington has forged productive ties over the years with other implacable foes. The Nixon administration's gestures to China, for example, were bold and controversial. For more than two decades, that country had vilified the United States and made shrill threats. A decent relationship with Chairman Mao Zedong seemed no more likely in the early 1970s than one with Kim seems now. But U.S. leaders took a chance, and it paid off. Likewise, in the mid-1990s, the Clinton administration ended decades of unrelenting hostility toward Vietnam. Today, the United States has productive relations with both former enemies.

Our current strategy risks a nightmarish outcome: a nuclear-armed North Korea convinced that its adversaries are determined to destroy it. Just as it is unwise to corner a dangerous animal, it is unwise to alienate a burgeoning nuclear power. We need to try a different approach — one that recognizes reality, however unpleasant that reality might be.