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## North Korea: Paper Tiger

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Another day, it must be another weapons test for North Korea. And that means wailing and gnashing of teeth from Seoul to Washington. And presidential statements denouncing the grave threat posed to world peace.

Yet the so-called Democratic People's Republic of Korea is an impoverished wreck. One American carrier group has more firepower than the entire North Korean military. It is the U.S. which threatens Pyongyang, not the other way around.

U.S. entanglement with Korea began with the Japanese surrender in 1945. Washington and Moscow divided the peninsula at the 49th parallel and occupied the southern and northern sections, respectively. As the Cold War enveloped U.S.-Soviet relations, the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea emerged as hostile independent states.

In the early years the DPRK was the more fearsome player. The U.S. refused to arm the ROK with heavy weapons to discourage authoritarian President Syngman Rhee from fulfilling his threat to march north. The Soviets were not so scrupulous in dealing with the North's Kim Il-sung, who almost conquered the entire peninsula after invading in June 1950 before U.S. forces turned the tide. After three years of see-saw warfare, an armistice was agreed near the initial boundary.

But no permanent peace was arranged, so American troops remained. Over the last half century, however, Chinese forces went home, South Korea raced past the North in economic development, Moscow and Beijing recognized Seoul, and the DPRK suffered economic collapse and famine. The balance of power of 1950 long ago disappeared.

Pyongyang retains a quantitative military edge, but its equipment is antiquated; North Korean troops are malnourished and get little training. The North is effectively bankrupt and without allies. With about 40 times the GDP and twice the population of the North, Seoul could outmatch the Kim regime in any way it chose. With large military reserves, a strong industrial base, abundant allies, and generous access to international credit markets, South Korea is well-positioned to triumph in any conflict.

It is obvious, then, that the DPRK doesn't pose much of a conventional threat to the South. The Kim regime could invade the ROK, but doing so would be far more likely to end in the destruction of the North than the South. And nothing suggests that Kim Jong-il is seeking martyrdom: he wants his virgins in this life, not the next.

Japan worries about threats from Pyongyang, but the former is more than capable of defending itself. Japan possesses the world's second largest economy, noted for its technological sophistication. There is little that Tokyo could not build or buy. More than 60 years after the end of World War II, it is time for Japan to take over responsibility for its own defense.

The DPRK has neither the interest nor the ability to challenge other nations in the region -- Indonesia, Australia, Philippines, et al. The North possesses an antiquated army and little else, not a globe-spanning military like that of the U.S.

It is even more obvious that Pyongyang poses no meaningful danger to America. The North has no ability to project military power. If it attempted to do so, U.S. air and naval power would make quick work of North Korea's forces.

The only Americans currently within range of the DPRK are the 28,000 troops stationed in the South. Their deployment, while unnecessary to protect the ROK, actually endangers the U.S. Disengagement would be the most effective means of reducing the threat to America.

What of the DPRK's nuclear and missile programs? They are primarily a problem for the North's neighbors and thus give other countries a good reason to consider augmenting both defensive and deterrence capabilities. However, North Korea apparently has neither weaponized nor miniaturized actual nuclear warheads. Pyongyang possesses no long-range missiles capable of accurately hitting American territory. The North's capabilities do not match its bluster.

That could eventually change, of course, but the DPRK obviously poses no present danger. There is no cause for precipitous action. In fact, Pyongyang is never likely to pose a genuine threat to America. The U.S. has the world's most sophisticated nuclear arsenal: any North Korean attack would be suicidal. Just one American missile with multiple warheads could destroy everything worth destroying in the North. If Washington could deter Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong, two of the greatest mass murderers in human history, it can deter Kim Jong-il.

What of proliferation, the fear of Pyongyang's possible sale of nuclear technologies to other regimes or even non-state actors? It is a legitimate concern, but hardly unprecedented. The U.S. already has dealt with a bigger proliferation problem -- Pakistan. Washington could make clear to Kim Jong-il and those who staff his regime that the sale of nuclear materials to non-state actors would result in their own death.

That would make selling nukes to raise money a poor investment, risking certain destruction for uncertain financial gain. This message could be reinforced by the U.S. offering to open alternative revenue sources, most notably trade, if the North adopted a more cooperative policy. Would the world be a better place if Kim Jong-il was overthrown, the Kim regime was disarmed, and Communism disappeared from the North? Of course. That would make the North Koreans freer and the rest of us more secure.

But U.S. foreign policy should never confuse fantasy predictions with geopolitical realities. The DPRK could be with us, and causing trouble, for years to come. However, Kim's regime is problem for America, not a threat to America's existence. The U.S. is a superpower. It should act like one. The next time Pyongyang rattles its sabers, Washington should respond with bored contempt.

