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With Realism and Restraint

By Doug Bandow

North Korea demonstrates the limits of President Barack Obama's more accommodating diplomacy.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea engages in perpetual brinkmanship. Last winter the tortuous negotiations over the North Korea's nuclear program crashed if not burned over verification procedures for Pyongyang's official nuclear declaration.

The Obama administration hopes to rejuvenate the six-party talks, but the way forward is uncertain after the North's recent missile launch.



In fact, the effort was much ado about nothing. The botched effort suggests that the DPRK poses less than a formidable military threat. Gen. James E. Cartwright, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, snickered: "On the idea of proliferation, would you buy from somebody that had failed three times in a row and never been successful?"

However, as a step designed to win international attention the test was far more successful, creating the usual public frenzy in Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington. The U.S. denounced the launch as illegal and went to the United Nations for redress.

U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon complained that the action was "not conducive to efforts to promote dialogue, regional peace and stability," as if those were North Korea's objectives.

China and Russia exhibited their usual reluctance to crack down on the North. With Beijing's call for "calm" and "restraint," the Security Council approved a resolution insisting on little more than enforcement of previously approved sanctions.

What should Washington do?

The Obama administration needs to realistically assess the conundrum that is North Korea. We should downplay any expectations of changing North Korea.

America should step back and let others take the lead in dealing with Pyongyang. A desperately poor, isolated state with an antiquated military, the DPRK poses far greater problems for its neighbors than for America.

Only South Korea is within reach of the North's army — a good reason for the U.S. to withdraw its troops, since they are not needed to safeguard the Republic of Korea. (Seoul enjoys a vast economic, technological, population, and diplomatic edge over the North.)

Japan along with the ROK is vulnerable to North Korean missiles. China and the South both fear a violent DPRK collapse and refugee flood. Beijing also suffers from the nightmare of spreading nuclear proliferation, which could result in Japan developing nuclear weapons.

Unfortunately, Washington and North Korea's neighbors have only bad options. It would be wonderful to create a democratic, humane DPRK. It is more important to

avoid a new Korean war and cap any North Korean nuclear arsenal.

Thus, the Obama administration should focus its efforts on halting any further North Korean nuclear developments.

Unfortunately, convincing Pyongyang to yield its small atomic arsenal will require a geopolitical miracle. However, Pyongyang can do little with a small cache of nuclear weapons: attacking the U.S. would be suicidal, and Kim prefers his virgins in the here and now.

In contrast, the North could do enormous damage with a large and growing stockpile of nuclear materiel, including underwriting widespread proliferation.

To the extent the DPRK has been willing to comply with its promises — both in accepting the Clinton-era Agreed Framework and the later accord negotiated with the Bush administration — it has been to freeze its existing program. Future negotiations should focus on the same end.

For the same reason the U.S. must not get sidetracked by the North's missile program. As one American official anonymously declared: "We are not going to ... let them distract us from the goal, which is denuclearization."

While the prospect of North Korea possessing advanced missile technology is unsettling, nuclear proliferation is the more important game.

Finally, Washington needs to concentrate on changing the negotiating dynamic with North Korea before negotiating with Pyongyang. For years the DPRK has used brinkmanship to win concessions. The U.S., ROK, and other friendly states need to reverse this reward structure.

First, they should respond to the North's provocations with bored contempt rather than excited fear. Calling an emergency session of the U.N. Security Council sent precisely the wrong message to Pyongyang.

Second, rather than publicly whining about North Korea's actions, friendly nations should quietly inform Pyongyang that they will offer no benefits while it is ratcheting up tensions.

If the DPRK responds positively, however, Washington should offer diplomatic recognition and the end of trade sanctions, small concessions in areas where punitive policies have manifestly failed; South Korea should move back toward the "Sunshine Policy."

The prospect of a peace treaty with America, full normalization of political and economic relations with the U.S., expanded trade with and aid from South Korea and Japan, and full participation in international institutions might beckon Pyongyang forward.

North Korea will long be with us. The Obama administration must recognize that any success will come only slowly, painfully, and incrementally, and as a result of a limited agenda realistically implemented.

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