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The best Korea strategy for the US is to let others take the lead

By Doug Bandow

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Nothing seems to upset North Korea more than being ignored. Hence Pyongyang's second nuclear test, punctuated by the separate firing of several short-range missiles.

Although the tests garnered global attention, they have little practical importance. North Korea has long been known to be a nuclear state and the regime's missile capabilities are also well-known.

Moreover, the tests may be tied to internal political considerations. "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il suffered a stroke last August. Kim may be attempting to make up for lost time in grooming a successor, flaunting more hardline international commitments to solidify military support for his plans.

In any case, Washington has few options. Even a short war against North Korea would be a humanitarian catastrophe.

The top objective should be to avoid, not trigger, a conflict. Today's North Korean regime seems bound to disappear eventually.

Which leaves diplomacy. Maybe North Korea is not interested in a negotiated settlement, yet brinkmanship always has been Pyongyang's favorite modus operandi.

Kim likely hopes the tests will move his nation to the top of US President Barack Obama's "to do" list, as well as raise the price Kim can charge for his cooperation. A deal may be more unlikely than ever, but it is still possible.

Unfortunately, Obama got off track by overstating the danger when he declared that "North Korea's nuclear and ballistic-missile programs pose a great threat to the peace and security of the world."

NO DIFFERENT

In fact, the North's missiles are no different from those possessed by a number of countries, and Pyongyang does not appear to have mastered the nuclear weaponization process, let alone the miniaturization procedure necessary to marry warhead and missile.

Instead, Washington and its allies should try to reprogram the North's negotiating formula. North

Korea wants to be the center of international attention, so Kim should not be rewarded with a plethora of statements beseeching the regime to cooperate.

The emergency UN Security Council meeting was a mistake for this reason. There was no emergency: The North Korean tests changed nothing and threatened no one.

Moreover, in April it took the Security Council a week to come up with a non-binding statement urging members to enforce previously approved sanctions in response to the North's long-range missile test. That likely caused more contempt than fear in Pyongyang.

Nor is it obvious that tighter sanctions, assuming that China approved, would do much good. The Kim regime has already allowed at least a half million, and perhaps more, of its citizens to die of starvation.

Which leaves the administration with diplomacy. Through bilateral discussions and multilateral negotiations such as the Six-Party Talks (assuming they can be revived), the Obama administration should explain that the US is interested in forging a more positive relationship with the North.

But no improvement will be possible so long as North Korea flouts international concerns. Washington should encourage South Korea and Japan to take a similar stance.

Further provocations by the North should elicit bored contempt rather than excited concern. There should be no generous new deals proposed while Pyongyang is violating past commitments.

Equally important, the US should step back and suggest that China, Seoul and Tokyo take the lead in dealing with the North. North Korea is years away from possessing missiles capable of accurately targeting the US.

Moreover, the North would never strike: Kim Jong-il wants his virgins in today's life, not the afterlife.

PROLIFERATION

More worrisome is the prospect of proliferation, but Pyongyang could hardly be a greater problem in this regard than the US' has-been ally, Pakistan. Washington should make clear to the North that sales to non-state actors would be a casus belli: No amount of money received would be worth the resulting risk, especially since engagement would create increased financial opportunities elsewhere.

To encourage China to take a more active role, the Obama administration should share its nightmare. US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton should have a private chat with Beijing, indicating that if the North builds a nuclear arsenal, the US is not inclined to remain in the middle, maintaining a nuclear umbrella over Pyongyang's neighbors.

While Washington might not affirmatively favor a decision by South Korea and Japan to exercise the nuclear option, the US would not likely prevent them from doing so. Thus it really would be in China's interests to help halt the North Korean nuclear program. The goal, of course, would not be to encourage proliferation, but to use the threat of proliferation to help roll back the program.

North Korea is a problem likely to be long with us. The Obama administration should recognize

the limitations inherent in any policy toward the North. Washington should let Pyongyang's neighbors take the lead in dealing with North Korea.

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