

What to Do about North Korea

BY *Sue Mi Terry*

During his October 2015 meeting with President Park Geun-hye, President Obama reaffirmed his support for South Korea's current careful engagement with North Korea. All three U.S. administrations going back to the Clinton presidency in the early 1990s have tried to address the North Korean threat through negotiations sweetened by economic aid to Pyongyang. The United States chipped in \$1.3 billion in food and energy assistance from 1998 to 2005—all for naught. Far from moderating, the Kim regime is more brutal and unpredictable than ever. North Korea continues to threaten its neighbors and is now in the process of putting nuclear warheads atop ballistic missiles that will be capable of reaching the U.S. homeland.

The United States has not been able to effectively influence North Korea. In order to provoke serious change, Washington should consider a coordinated, multipronged strategy that relies on enhanced cooperation with all of its regional partners.

LIMITED OPTIONS

There are three broad options for the United States to address the North Korean threat without the use of force: (1) return to negotiations without preconditions, which basically means accepting North Korea as a nuclear weapons state, (2) continue with the policy of “strategic patience,” which means ignoring the North until it demonstrates seriousness about denuclearization, or (3) ratchet up pressure on Pyongyang, even if it means risking a possible escalation by the North or regime collapse.

The problem with the first option is that it rewards provocations and brinkmanship and perpetuates the Kim regime's rule, which is at the heart of the

problem. And negotiating without preconditions will not work any better in the future than in the past.

What of the second option—continuing to show “strategic patience”? While the Obama administration was right not to reconvene the six-party talks, which are unlikely to achieve any results, the problem with the current policy is that it does nothing to stop North Korea's nuclear and missile programs or its threats against neighboring countries and the United States, which only continue to grow.

The third option—the only option not yet tried—is to ratchet up the pressure on the Kim regime, particularly with tougher sanctions. The fear that prevents the implementation of this option is that Pyongyang will respond to Washington's hard-line tactics with more escalation, which may spiral out of control. But the North Korean regime is not suicidal or irrational. Survival is its utmost goal, and the regime wants to avoid an all-out war, which it knows it is certain to lose. Consider the last time the North acted out. In August 2015, Pyongyang infiltrated soldiers across the demilitarized zone to plant a mine that maimed two South Korean soldiers. The threat of war loomed before a dramatic meeting between the two sides yielded an agreement to stand down and foster more civilian exchanges. This has been the pattern ever since the end of the Korean War: the Kim regime always backs away from the brink.

THE PATH FORWARD

Given this pattern of provocation, the United States need not unduly worry about the North's response if Washington ratchets up pressure on the regime. Effectively pursuing this option will require a multipronged strategy.

Strengthen deterrence. Essential elements of deterrence include enhancing missile defense systems around the Korean Peninsula, introducing more advanced air and naval assets in the region, and

staging more frequent and robust U.S.-Korea joint military exercises.

Enhance counterproliferation measures. This should include interdicting, boarding, and inspecting all North Korean ships or aircraft suspected of sanctions violations or arms sales.

Double down on sanctions by enforcing against North Korea the kind of sanctions that brought Iran to the negotiating table. Washington should attempt to cut off as many of the North's revenue streams as possible, focusing particularly on drug smuggling, currency counterfeiting, and money laundering. The model here is the sanctions on Banco Delta Asia that proved to be effective in 2005 in freezing \$25 million in North Korean funds held in an obscure bank in Macao. The United States can go further by threatening to freeze the assets of third-country financial entities, including Chinese institutions, suspected of helping North Korea. A good start would be to enact the North Korea Sanctions and Policy Enhancement Act introduced in October 2015.

Make concerted efforts to draw global attention to the North's vast prison camps and other egregious human rights violations. The UN Security Council should be asked to refer North Korea to the International Criminal Court or establish a special tribunal as it did with former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. If Russia and China block the Security Council from acting, the United States should press the General Assembly to set up a special tribunal. The United States should also impose sanctions for North Korean human rights violations that would restrict the regime's international freedom to maneuver.

Do more to help the people of North Korea break the information blockade imposed by the state. The United States should increase efforts to support radio broadcasts and other activities to transmit information into North Korea.

Lobby China. Washington needs to work behind the scenes to make Beijing understand that continuing to provide the Kim family with a blank check is a liability for China, especially if the North, as expected, stages a fresh provocation in the coming months.

These options may strike some as variations on ideas that have already been tried and failed. There is an element of truth to this, but there are no novel answers or magical solutions to the enduring problem posed by North Korea. The best that the United States can do is to implement existing policies of containment with more rigor than has been previously tried. In the past, governments in both Washington and Seoul have oscillated between different policies—soft-line one moment, hard-line the next. What is needed now is for the two allies to adopt a consistent and coordinated policy of applying pressure in consort with regional partners until the North folds.

While an approach that could destabilize North Korea raises valid concerns about loose nuclear weapons and a humanitarian crisis, these worries are offset by the threats of proliferation if the regime remains in power, especially the export of nuclear technology to sponsors of terrorism such as Iran and Syria. Given the danger of such proliferation, North Korea's collapse and the subsequent reunification of the Korean Peninsula are an opportunity to be sought rather than a risk to be avoided. ♦

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