

The North Korean Nuclear Threat, and How to Address It

New thinking and a new paradigm are vital.

Robert Joseph, National Review, July 3, 2017,

<http://www.nationalreview.com/article/449173/north-korea-nuclear-threat>

Ten years ago, the Bush administration reversed policy on North Korea, in a return to what the president himself had repeatedly declared to be a failed approach under his predecessor, Bill Clinton. The pressure from financial actions and from the interdiction of its trade in nuclear materials and missiles was lifted. Negotiations were resumed and concession after concession was made to keep Pyongyang at the table. Predictably, like the 1994 Agreed Framework, the effort failed, as the North violated its commitments and continued its missile and nuclear programs, including large-scale uranium enrichment.

Over the past decade, three American presidents have failed in their pursuit to “de-nuclearize” North Korea. The Bush policy failed, the Obama policy of “strategic patience” failed, and there is no evidence to suggest that the emerging Trump policy will yield any different result. While their rhetoric has differed markedly, all three presidents have accepted the same basic assumptions and employed the same economic and diplomatic tools with the same results.

All have increased sanctions on the regime and all have seen China as the key to ending the North’s nuclear and missile programs. Beijing has always played along with us, or more accurately played us along. At times it has taken actions directed at the North, such as after the first nuclear test in October 2006 and again in recent months. But these Potemkin-like actions have not been long-lasting and have never been sufficient to change Pyongyang’s behavior.

Today, North Korea is in a race to the finish line in achieving its objective of developing a nuclear-armed intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) able to hold American cities hostage to deter us from coming to the support of our South Korean ally in the event of conflict on the peninsula. All three presidents have declared this outcome to be unacceptable and intolerable, and all have assured us in different words that “it won’t happen.”

But “it” is happening, and at a frenetic pace. Recently Pyongyang conducted its ninth missile launch in the last year. This was a test of a new medium-range solid-fuel missile, which can target American allies and American military forces in the region. Kim Jong Un, the absolute dictator of the North, called it a “perfect weapon” and reportedly ordered it to go into serial production. The previous week, the North tested what is thought to be yet another new missile, which according to the Washington Post is “apparently, a smaller version of one of its ICBM prototypes.”

With each missile and nuclear test, North Korea comes closer to achieving its goal. While it is sometimes compared to the threat faced by the United States in the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, North Korea may well be even more dangerous. It is led by a tyrant with little regard for his own people who is willing to gamble against high odds to secure his goals, so the risk of miscommunication and misunderstandings with the North are much higher than those that existed with the Soviet Union. In other words, deterrence may well fail.

It is now urgent that the U.S. fundamentally change the paradigm. Sanctions and diplomacy are important but not sufficient. They are tools, not strategies. They have not succeeded and will not succeed on their own. Likewise, the preemptive use of armed force — wrongly, but often, suggested as the only alternative to continuing the failed approach of the past — is also not a strategy but a tool that carries a high risk of escalation and the potential loss of millions of lives.

Developing and implementing a comprehensive strategy must be a priority for the National Security Council and the interagency, integrating the diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and military instruments required to respond to the threat. The Trump administration is reportedly conducting a review of North Korea policy. The next step is to do the hard work of fashioning and implementing an effective strategy.

To be successful, the strategy must be directed not at denuclearization but at regime change from within, for only regime change will achieve an end to the North's missile and nuclear threats. As we have witnessed for 25 years, focusing on denuclearization places the emphasis of U.S. policy on negotiations and has led to the now well-established pattern of granting serial concessions to encourage Pyongyang to come to the table and, at times, additional concessions to satisfy the hopes of our regional allies — hopes that are not based on sound policy or experience but on the expectation that North Korea will — the next time — negotiate in good faith. How many times have we watched that same movie expecting a different outcome? How much longer will we provide concessions that only strengthen the regime and perpetuate the very threats that we seek to end?

The key to a successful strategy is containment of the North until the regime dissolves from its own internal weaknesses and contradictions. Here, Ceausescu's Rumania is the model. While North Korea is not the Soviet Union and today's international environment is much different from that of the Cold War, containment is the best foundation for an effective strategy. This should be the focus of our diplomacy, as well as our intelligence, economic, and military tools.

The following ideas are offered for consideration as part of a containment strategy. The first five are proactive, multilateral measures that would require U.S. leadership to succeed. They are intended both to further isolate the North and to make known to its leaders the prospect for meaningful consequences in advance of further nuclear and missile tests. In the past, the approach has been to react to provocations, primarily with U.N. Security Council condemnations and additional sanctions, often resulting in the dumbing down of the adopted responses. International consensus to take firm action in the event of provocations may well be easier to achieve before rather than after the fact.

The last two measures should be taken to strengthen deterrence of the North and assurance of allies, and to provide an insurance policy if the U.S. and the international community fail to dissuade or compel North Korea to end its nuclear and missile programs. The United States must be ready on short notice to defend against a nuclear-armed North Korea that could emerge sooner than intelligence estimates assess. The North is a hard intelligence target and, as was the case with the Soviet Union and China, it is likely that its nuclear coming-out party will be sooner than expected.

(1) Reenergize both the Proliferation Security Initiative to interdict North Korean trafficking in WMD and missile technology and the multinational efforts to deny North Korea access to the international financial system.

(2) Build consensus with U.S. allies, particularly South Korea and Japan, and perhaps the broader international community to approve in advance the shooting down of any North Korean missile flying outside the North's borders.

(3) Build international consensus to have states with diplomatic relations with North Korea commit in advance to respond to any further nuclear test by suspending or cutting off all ties.

(4) Seek broad support for the proposition that any further nuclear test is a threat to international peace and security, thereby justifying countermeasures, potentially including a blockade, as was done around Cuba in 1962.

(5) Initiate and fund robust international efforts to highlight the brutality and gross human-rights violations of the North Korean regime. This is the greatest vulnerability of the regime and the key to fundamental change from within.

(6) Rebuild U.S. theater nuclear capabilities to strengthen deterrence and reassure allies. Consider in particular the rebuilding of the nuclear sea-based Tomahawk force, which was eliminated by the Obama administration as part of a policy of unilateral nuclear disarmament.

(7) Initiate a sustained effort to develop and deploy effective homeland missile defense with land-, sea-, and space-based interceptors and sensors. The Obama administration reduced the number of ground-based interceptors that were considered necessary to meet the North Korean threat and eliminated programs designed to keep U.S. defenses ahead of the advancing threat. With leadership and funding, new technologies make possible effective defenses, as demonstrated in the recent successful test of the ground-based interceptor.

President Moon visited Washington last week and reportedly vowed to stand firm with President Trump on North Korea. President Trump should insist that our policy be based on the solid ground of containment and regime change from within, and not on the quicksand of "denuclearization." Twenty-five years of failed policy makes clear that regime change is a prerequisite to ending the North's nuclear and missile programs.

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