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## Deadlock: North Korea's Nuclear Test and US Policy

By Mel Gurtov  
February 4, 2016



North Korea continues to rattle the cages of both friend and foe. Despite near-universal condemnation of its fourth nuclear test and a deplorable human rights record, Kim Jong-un defiantly disregards the major powers and the United Nations. And now, adding insult to injury, the UN Secretary-General reports that North Korea has notified various UN agencies of its intention to launch a satellite, apparently to test its ballistic missile technology.

Continued nuclear testing by North Korea is its way of demonstrating independence of action. Nuclear weapons are the DPRK's "insurance policy," David Sanger writes – its last best hope for regime survival and legitimacy, and the most dramatic way to insist that the North's interests should not be neglected. All one has to do is, through North Korean blinkers, see what has happened in Iraq, Iran, and Libya, where dictators did not have a nuclear deterrent. Two of them were invaded, and all had to surrender their nuclear-weapon capability.

The longstanding US approach to North Korea's nuclear weapons is way off the mark. The Obama administration's strategy of "strategic patience" shows little attention to North Korean motivations. The US insistence that no change in policy is conceivable unless and until North Korea agrees to denuclearize ensures continuing tension, the danger of a disastrous miscalculation, and more and better North Korean nuclear weapons. The immediate focus of US policy should be on trust building.

Increasing the severity of punishment, with threats of more to come, is representative of a failed policy. When the White House press secretary acknowledged recently that the US goal of defanging North Korea had not been reached but that "we have succeeded in making North Korea more isolated ever before," he was actually acknowledging the failure. The task is, or should be, not to further isolate North Korea but rather to *bring it out of its isolation*, starting by accepting the legitimacy of its security concerns. The more isolated the regime is and the more it is driven into a corner, the more likely it is that it will resort to provocations and shows of strength.

Demanding that China step up and use its relationship with North Korea as leverage to get it to agree to denuclearize is a fool's errand. Secretary of State John Kerry has chided his Chinese counterpart to abandon "business as usual" with the North and join in enacting sanctions on shipping, banking, and oil. Over many years, Chinese leaders have made plain that North Korea's nuclear and missile testing endanger China's as well as Korean peninsula security. They have shown their displeasure by resuming trilateral Japan-South Korea-China security dialogue after three years, and by condemning North Korea's latest nuclear test in statements from Beijing and in a UN Security Council press statement.

But with all that, the Chinese are not about to dump Kim Jong-un. Political distancing, yes, but no serious (i.e., destabilizing) economic sanctions such as the US is now demanding. While in Beijing in late January, Kerry threatened that the US, with South Korea's possible approval (a reversal of position), would go ahead with installing a theater missile defense system (THAAD) that the Chinese have long regarded as actually aimed at neutralizing their own missiles rather than only North Korea's. Rest assured that all such a threat will accomplish is to harden Chinese views of US strategy in Asia, lately strained further by heightened US patrolling in the South China Sea, and lessen their commitment to imposing sanctions on the North.

The DPRK's possession of an increasingly sophisticated nuclear program that aims at miniaturizing bombs is no small matter. As Sigfried Hecker, former director of the Los Alamos National Laboratory, points out, the North Koreans "may have enough bomb fuel for 18 bombs, with a capacity to make 6 to 7 more annually. That, combined with the increased sophistication

they surely achieved with this test, paints a troublesome picture.” Sanctions, threats, and “half-hearted diplomacy,” Hecker observes, have failed to change the nuclear picture.

Serious engagement with North Korea remains the only realistic policy option for the United States and its allies. To be effective, however (i.e., meaningful to the other side), engagement must be undertaken strategically—as a calculated use of incentives with expectation of mutual rewards, namely in security and peace. And it should be undertaken in a spirit of mutual respect and with due regard for sensitivity in language and action.

Here are three elements of an engagement package:

First is revival of the Six-Party Talks without preconditions and with faithfulness to previous six-party and North-South Korea joint declarations—in particular, the principle contained in the Six-Party Joint Statement of September 2005: “commitment for commitment, action for action.” At a new round of talks, the US and its partners should present a package that, in return for verifiable steps to neutralize North Korea’s nuclear, provides the North with security assurances, a proposal for ending the Korean War, a nonaggression pact with big-power guarantees (with China on board), and meaningful economic assistance from both NGOs and governments. Such a major departure from “strategic patience” would be in line with Kim Jong-il’s message to President George W. Bush in November 2002: “If the United States recognizes our sovereignty and assures nonaggression, it is our view that we should be able to find a way to resolve the nuclear issue in compliance with the demands of a new century. . . .If the United States makes a bold decision, we will respond accordingly.”

Second is creation of a Northeast Asia Security Dialogue Mechanism. We might recall that such a group was anticipated in the final statements of the Six-Party Talks, and that South Korea’s President Park has proposed a similar peace initiative. In the absence of honest brokers for disputes in Northeast Asia, the NEASDM can function as a “circuit breaker,” able to interrupt patterns of escalating confrontation when tensions in the region increase—as they are now. But the NEASDM would not focus exclusively on North Korean denuclearization. It would be open to a wide range of issues related to security in the broadest sense, such as environmental, labor, poverty, and public health problems; a code of conduct to govern territorial and boundary disputes; military budget transparency, weapons transfers, and deployments; measures to combat terrorism and piracy; creation of a nuclear-weapon free zone (NWFZ) in all or part of Northeast Asia; and ways to support confidence building and trust in the dialogue process itself. Normalization of relations among all six countries should be a priority; full recognition of the DPRK by the United States and Japan costs nothing but is an important incentive for meaningful North Korean participation.

Third is significant new humanitarian assistance to North Korea. The US and South Korean emphasis on sanctions punishes the wrong people. Kim Jong-un’s complete disregard for human rights, vigorously condemned in a UN commission of inquiry report in 2014, is before the General Assembly and will be debated in the Security Council despite China’s disapproval. (The vote to debate was 9-4 with two abstentions.) But neither human rights deprivations nor nuclear testing should affect humanitarian aid to North Korea—food, medicine, medical equipment, technical training—which at least helps some portion of its population and sends the message

that the international community cares about the North Korean people. Humanitarian assistance to the DPRK is pitifully little—under \$50 million in 2014, and declining every year.

The same kind of steady, patient, and creative diplomacy that led to the nuclear deal with Iran is still possible in the North Korea case. As the Under Secretary-General of the UN, Jeffrey Feltman, said, Iran shows that “diplomacy can work to address non-proliferation challenges. There is strong international consensus on the need to work for peace, stability and denuclearization on the Korean Peninsula. To achieve this goal, dialogue is the way forward.”