

**Untying North Korean ‘nots’** by Ralph Cossa and Brad Glosserman

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North Korea last weekend again defied world opinion and tested a medium-range ballistic missile. The launch was the first of 2017, and constitutes the first real security test for the Donald Trump administration; the president noted in a press conference Monday that “North Korea is a big, big problem and we will deal with that very strongly.” An effective response demands a clear understanding of the forces driving North Korean behavior; too often, however, myths and misunderstandings dominate thinking about the North.

Corrective #1: Kim Jong Un is not irrational. The typical response to a North Korean act is either a rueful or angry headshake along with a comment about North Korean irrationality and “those crazy Kims.” The Kim family is anything but irrational. They have played a poor hand extremely well, defying international opinion, antagonizing allies and adversaries alike, and ignoring their chief benefactors. They have relentlessly pursued a narrowly defined national interest and shrugged off virtually every attempt to get them to change course or even compromise. No other country has been in the headlines for over two decades by flouting the United Nations, the United States, and China, yet managed to stay on the course set by its leadership. North Korea has figured out how far it can go without prompting an overwhelming response. This is exceptional strategic thinking, not irrationality. No leader does anything that he or she thinks is “irrational.” When we say Kim Jong Un is irrational, what we are really saying is “we don’t understand his rationale.” Why does the North do what it does? Quite simply because (so far, at least) it’s working!

Corrective #2: North Korean tests are not provocations. While outright defiance of the international community is by definition provocative, the primary purpose of North Korean nuclear and missile tests is not to provoke. Instead, those tests are intended to advance weapons programs. That development schedule is primarily determinative, and not driven (or restricted) by external events. Of course, if a test overshadows the summit between President Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Abe Shinzo, that is icing on the cake. North Korea is also happy to demonstrate that it is not intimidated by Defense Secretary Mattis’ visit to South Korea and Japan and his statements of support for both allies, or by a phone call between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping that likely addressed North Korean issues.

The best proof for this proposition is Pyongyang’s readiness to test despite the political uncertainty in Seoul. Many analysts – us included – expected North Korea to hold

off until the Constitutional Court ruled on the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye to avoid distracting the Korean public from the current political spectacle and remind them of the North Korean threat. If Pyongyang put foreign considerations foremost, it would have held off.

Corrective #3: China is not the answer. It has become commonplace to insist that China is the key to the North Korean problem and that if the world could only get Beijing to see the Pyongyang government for the problem that it is, it will tighten the screws and get the North to fall in line. There are several problems with this logic. First, China may be troubled by North Korean behavior – the suspected assassination of Kim Jong Nam just the latest in a series of events – but there is still more value for Beijing in the regime’s survival than to have it collapse. We explained several years ago why China prefers a divided peninsula: it wants a buffer zone between it and democracy, capitalism, and US forces; Pyongyang’s behavior distracts from Chinese misdeeds, increases China’s relevance as an important actor on the global strategic stage, and gives Beijing leverage in dealing with the West, which wants denuclearization more than China (despite denuclearization being a “common objective”). That logic is no less compelling today.

Second, China may provide a lifeline to the embattled regime, but that does not mean that it can compel North Korea to act as it wishes. The apparent killing of Kim Jong Nam removes yet another arrow from Beijing’s already limited quiver. There is no love lost between North Koreans and Chinese; in private discussions, each complains vociferously about the other and both believe the other needs it more than it needs its partner. Finally, the US-Israel relationship provides a compelling analogy. The two countries are close partners and allies, and Israel gets considerable aid and assistance from the US. But every US administration has learned that it cannot compel its Israeli counterpart to do as Washington wishes on national security matters. It is unrealistic to expect Beijing to have more leverage over Pyongyang.

Corrective #4: Force or sanctions alone are not the answer. As previously explained (“Dealing with North Korea: The Trump Administration’s Options,” [PacNet #87](#), Dec. 1, 2016), the US has a spectrum of responses to deal with a defiant North Korea. Having tried negotiations and mounting (but ultimately limited) pressure, there is a growing view that the time for half-measures has passed and the US and like-minded nations should adopt a more aggressive approach. But a march on Pyongyang, while within US/ROK capabilities, would result in unacceptable levels of collateral damage and should only be contemplated in response to an egregious DPRK military provocation.

Nor is there any proof – anywhere in the world – that diplomatic and economic pressure, no matter how forcefully

applied, will force a regime to its knees; one as determined as North Korea will be even more resistant to such a strategy. When pressure works, it is paired with diplomatic incentives to allow both sides to claim victory. Nothing short of the very real prospect of regime collapse will persuade Pyongyang to give up its nuclear capability.

Corrective #5: The Pyongyang regime is not poised today for collapse. North Korea has experienced mass famine. It has had difficulties in recent years and its economy is but a fraction of that of its two neighbors. But this year rice production increased 23 percent. The private sector of the economy – officially illegal but still tolerated – is set for 3-4 percent growth. Kim Jong Un is increasing strain among the leadership – evident in the swelling number of higher-ranking official defections, demotions or executions – but there is no indication that the regime is tottering, even if the assassination of his half-brother (if confirmed) demonstrates a continued high level of (justifiable?) paranoia. This event does, however, give Washington apparent cause to put North Korea back on the list of state-sponsored terrorism, which could help tighten a few screws.

Corrective #6: Time is not on our side. The obvious conclusion from all the above is that Pyongyang is in many ways the master of its own destiny and the West cannot wait until events take care of the North Korean problem. North Korea is not sitting still and is improving its military capabilities. It is determined to have the capacity to reach out and touch the United States, believing that such an option will both deter the US from pursuing regime change and taking action against Pyongyang when it seeks to shape the regional security environment in ways that it considers beneficial.

Our challenge is to persuade Pyongyang that the closer it comes to achieving its stated goal of being able to reach out and touch the United States with nuclear weapons, the less secure it will become. Thus far, the North's threats and egregious behavior have been tolerated, not because of its nuclear capabilities but because of the death and destruction it could rain on the Republic of Korea – Seoul is within artillery range of the DMZ and Pyongyang's conventional forces pose a formidable threat, as they have for decades. But the day Washington, Seoul, and others become convinced that the North is capable of deploying a weapon of mass destruction against the US or its allies in the ROK and Japan, then the cost of not doing anything may exceed the costs associated with conflict and war on the Peninsula may not only become more likely but necessary.

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