

US Plans for North Korea Threaten International Security

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Relations with North Korea are once again in crisis mode. North Korea, we are told, inexplicably launched dual provocations with its nuclear and ballistic missile tests, threatening the security of the United States. It is a simple story, with North Korean irrationality and belligerence on one side, and Washington's customary desire for peace and stability on the other.

Omitted from the standard narrative is anything that would make sense of recent events.

North Korea's nuclear test on January 6 drew fierce condemnation and calls for fresh sanctions. It is interesting to contrast Western outrage over North Korea with the treatment given other nuclear-armed nations operating outside of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. The Israeli military receives \$3.1 billion annually from the United States while U.S. President Barack Obama has proposed furnishing Pakistan with \$860 million in aid next fiscal year, including \$265 million in military materiel. Aid to India is more modest, but the United States maintains good relations with India and military cooperation between the two nations is expanding.

Clearly, there is a double standard at play, with pats on the back for Israel, Pakistan and India, and brickbats for the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK – the official name for North Korea). The reason is not difficult to fathom. North Korea is the only one of the four nations that the U.S. has targeted in its operational war plans. The United States and South Korea signed the latest operational plan in June of last year. Dubbed Oplan 5015, it covers limited war scenarios and includes a preemptive strike on the DPRK's strategic targets and "decapitation raids" to kill North Korean leaders.

The more North Korea's nuclear weapons program advances, however, the less likely Oplan 5015 can ever be implemented.

Couple Oplan 5015 with the annual military exercises the U.S. conducts with South Korea, and is it any wonder that North Korea feels threatened? In the West, military exercises are sloughed off as a routine matter and North Korean reaction as overly sensitive. Imagine the hysteria, however, that would greet a joint Russian-Cuban military exercise in the Caribbean, practicing the invasion of the United States. Now multiply that perception by the lopsided power imbalance between the DPRK and the United States, and the North Korean reaction appears more rational. North Korea feels threatened because it is threatened.

During the George W. Bush Administration, U.S. officials counselled their North Korean

counterparts to take note of the Libyan example. Libya abandoned its nuclear program in exchange for better relations with the United States and North Korea can do it too, went the message. These days, that message looks rather different, and the DPRK points out that it has found the Libyan example instructive, as well as those of Yugoslavia and Iraq. For a small targeted nation like North Korea, a nuclear deterrent is seen as a means of warding off attack. As a North Korean news commentary put it, the nuclear test was not intended to threaten or provoke, but to cope with the “undisguised hostile policy” of the U.S. and avert “the danger of war with the help of the strongest deterrence.” Given Washington’s propensity in recent years for bombing, invading, destabilizing and overthrowing governments, North Korea’s concern does not seem misplaced.

For all the outcry over the nuclear issue, it must be pointed out that the United States has only itself to blame for the recent turn of events. For the past several years, the DPRK has repeatedly asked the United States for negotiations, only to be snubbed each time. The U.S. position is that the DPRK must substantially denuclearize as a precondition for negotiations. In other words, the U.S. must be given its end goal upfront and all the DPRK would receive in return would be the mere promise of talk. This one-sided approach has been an effective means of blocking the threat of a diplomatic solution.

Little more than a year ago, North Korea offered to temporarily suspend its nuclear weapons program if the United States would do the same with its anti-DPRK military exercises, in the interests of “easing tension.” North Korea added that it stood ready “to sit with the U.S. any time” to discuss the proposal. It was an opening bid in what was hoped would lead to dialogue. Predictably, U.S. officials were rudely dismissive and the opportunity to negotiate a resolution of differences was lost.

One month after its latest nuclear test, North Korea launched an earth observation satellite into orbit, further inflaming Western sensibilities. The reaction was as fierce as it was unreasoning, and there was a deliberate effort to obfuscate the distinction between a ballistic missile test and a satellite launch. The two are not the same.

A satellite launch vehicle relies on an engine with a low-thrust, long-burn time in order to achieve a trajectory high enough to place a satellite into orbit. Testing a ballistic missile requires a flatter trajectory, aimed at maximizing strike distance. For North Korea to test the same missile for ballistic purposes, it would need to redesign the engine. Furthermore, a ballistic missile test requires a reentry vehicle, possessing a heat shield able to withstand the high temperature of passing back through the atmosphere. The DPRK has never tested a reentry vehicle.

Relying on the medium-range Unha satellite launch vehicle as a stepping stone to ballistic missile capability is essentially a non-starter. According to German aerospace engineer Markus Schiller, “I assume that they are doing the best they can with the Unha, showing a very slow but continuous progress toward a small satellite launch capability. Turning this program into a real weapon that is deployed in numbers and could hit cities at the push of a button will take decades at that pace.”

UN Security Council Resolution 1874 prohibits the DPRK from “any launch using ballistic missile technology.” This demand raises an interesting conundrum. Article I of the international space treaty specifies that outer space “shall be free for exploration and use by all States without discrimination of any kind.” What is the hierarchy when a Security Council resolution contravenes international law to deny a right to one nation that is the

entitlement of all? The UN Security Council is a political organ, not judicial.

All five permanent members of the UN Security Council have agreed on the need for a new sanctions resolution but differ sharply on its nature. China and Russia want sanctions to focus on curtailing nuclear weapons development, whereas the United States, South Korea, and Japan want collective punishment of the entire population of the DPRK.

It has been reported that the proposed resolution, as drafted by the United States, bans North Korean ships from docking at foreign ports, in an effort to sharply limit international trade. It also includes measures to block the DPRK from access to international banking. Furthermore, U.S. officials seek a total ban on oil shipments to North Korea. As the DPRK has no oil of its own, that measure could be expected to produce national economic collapse and impoverishment of the population.

Behind the scenes, U.S. officials are pressuring China to cancel its contracts to import minerals from the DPRK, and to deny North Korean planes from entering Chinese airspace. The United States is also demanding that China terminate food shipments to the DPRK. With eighty percent mountainous terrain, North Korea has limited arable land, and food imports are needed to supplement agricultural output. If the United States is successful in forcing China to halt food shipments, much of North Korea's population would be driven into hunger and malnutrition. The brutality of the measures the U.S. is hoping to implement is rather breathtaking.

Getting China and Russia onboard with such punitive sanctions is not going to be easy. American officials respond to Chinese and Russian recalcitrance with the technique they know best: bullying. The Chinese government-linked *Global Times* points out, however: "Washington should be clear that it cannot push China around."

Independently, the United States and South Korea are moving ahead on bilateral sanctions. There is talk of implementing secondary boycotts against any bank doing business with North Korea. Given that international transactions process through U.S. banks, this measure would have the effect of dissuading any bank from dealing with the DPRK. According to a South Korean government official, "South Korea and the U.S. are pushing to employ all possible means to take relevant measures that can effectively bring pain to North Korea."

Seoul, for its part, closed down operations at the Kaesong Industrial Park in North Korea, the last inter-Korean agreement remaining in place. It also resumed cross-border loudspeaker broadcasts. These are only the opening moves in a wide-ranging plan to impose hardship on North Korea. A South Korean official has revealed that the government intends to lean on Southeast Asian nations that employ North Korean labor to sever that relationship and eliminate another source of hard currency for the DPRK.

It has also been announced that South Korean President Park Geun-hye and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe will meet with President Obama in the coming weeks to discuss further ways to ratchet up the pressure on North Korea.

China and Russia point out that the only viable solution to the dispute is dialogue. That is not how U.S. officials perceive the matter, as they sternly lecture the Chinese on the need for a harsher approach. North Korea has a nuclear weapons program because it feels threatened. The U.S. position is that threatening North Korea has not worked. Therefore, more threats are needed. This circular logic can only convince the DPRK of the correctness

of its course.

It may be that U.S. officials are more interested in capitalizing on North Korea's nuclear program as a pretext to accelerate the Asia Pivot and tighten the military noose around China. The United States and South Korea have agreed to station a Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in the latter nation, ostensibly directed at North Korea. The AN/TPY-2 radar accompanying the radar can be set in two modes, however. In terminal mode, it can detect incoming missiles, but in forward mode it can cover a broad swath of China and a portion of Russia, tracking missiles in their ascending phase and feeding that data to U.S.-based missile defense sites thousands of miles away. By accepting a THAAD battery, South Korea is being incorporated into the U.S. military build-up against China.

South Korea has also been drawn into a tripartite plan for sharing military information with Japan and the United States, further entangling it as a junior member in U.S. regional plans. South Korea's military operations center will be joined directly to the U.S. system via Link 16, the data exchange network currently used by NATO and the United States.

The United States wasted little time in demonstrating its disinterest in dialogue, sending a B-52 bomber from Guam to overfly South Korea, in a not so veiled message to the DPRK. U.S. military officials are also consulting with the South Korean military on the possible deployment of B-52 and B-2 bombers on South Korean soil, along with F-22 fighter planes.

It has already been announced that the annual Key Resolve and Foal Eagle military exercises, slated to run from March 7 through April 30, will be the largest ever held. The exercises, rehearsing the invasion of North Korea, will include the USS John C. Stennis aircraft carrier, the USS North Carolina submarine, B-52 and B-2 bombers, and F-22 fighters. The newly minted Oplan 5015 will play an important role in the exercises.

North Korea points out that as long as the United States maintains its hostile policy, "our suspension of nuclear development or nuclear abandonment cannot happen." The formula for resolving the dispute is clear. The DPRK's legitimate security concerns must be addressed if North Korea is going to give up its nuclear program. Only negotiations can accomplish that.

But diplomacy is the one option that Washington rules out, and there is an excess of reckless and dangerous rhetoric. Instead, the United States is pursuing measures that could seriously threaten regional security. China and Russia are firmly advocating negotiations as the only sensible solution. It remains to be seen whether anyone in Washington is listening or not.

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