



Here we go again! by Ralph A. Cossa

Ralph Cossa (ralph@pacforum.org) is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS in Honolulu.

Stop me if you've heard this one before. The North Koreans do something provocative (nuclear test, missile launch, etc.); the world rises as one to soundly and firmly condemn this grave violation of United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions, a demonstration of solidarity that lasts, if we're lucky, 24 hours; then the squabbling begins anew over how severe the consequences will be. This results in a watered-down UNSC resolution with some new (unlikely to be completely enforced) sanctions, an expression of outrage by Pyongyang, and then another act of provocation.

To quote my childhood hero the late Yogi Berra, it's *deja vu* all over again. The only difference this time is that the North Koreans started with the nuclear test rather than a missile launch. We already are seeing preparations for the missile test (thinly disguised as a satellite launch) which is sure to follow; I would also not be surprised to see another (fifth) nuclear test as part of this current string of events. Meanwhile the debate goes on at the UNSC over just how strong the sanctions will be. At three weeks and running, it's the most prolonged nuclear test debate ever, with Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo promising "painful" sanctions to demonstrate it is no longer "business as usual" and Beijing, not always but this time joined by Moscow, calling on "all sides" to refrain from destabilizing actions, as if "all sides" were at fault for the latest crisis. Meanwhile Pyongyang, convinced that such actions ultimately do more to divide than to unite the international community, sits back and dreams up new ways of threatening all-out war.

Isn't it time to disabuse North Korea of this notion? I don't expect the UNSC to endorse the tough line proposed by the US and its allies. Even though the Chinese should feel disrespected, if not humiliated, by this latest act of defiance from its client state, it still refuses to use even the limited leverage it has to send Kim Jong Un and company a firm, credible message. Instead, Beijing warns of severe consequences – not if Pyongyang continues to violate international norms, but against Seoul if it should try to defend itself by introducing the US Terminal High-Altitude Air Defense (THAAD) system in the South. In what universe do you protect the aggressive while warning the potential victim to not defend itself? And they call Pyongyang "irrational"!

Why not try this instead: take the strong measures proposed by Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo and set them aside temporarily and immediately announce the lowest common denominator sanctions we can all quickly agree upon. Then announce that, if another provocation occurs, the stronger sanctions – which should be spelled out in no uncertain terms – will automatically be implemented and enforced.

This is called deterrence. It is too late to stop the nuclear test that just took place and Beijing has already made it clear that this latest slap in China's face, while it stings, is not enough to pull the plug on its erstwhile ally. But we need to break the cycle. The best way to do this is to spell out in advance the consequences of the next provocation, so that the next action brings us together rather than provides yet another opportunity for Pyongyang to divide and conquer.

What will it take to get Beijing to go along? First, it has to come to grips with the fact that its current policy toward North Korea – not unlike the US and ROK policies – is not working. Recall in November, Chinese President Xi Jinping sent the fifth ranking member of the Chinese Communist Party Standing Committee, Liu Yunshan, to Pyongyang to stand and wave and hold hands with Kim Jung Un as the Korean Workers Party celebrated its 70th anniversary with a display of the troops and weaponry it has threatened to use against the US and ROK. The quid pro quo for Liu's visit – not specified but widely assumed – was good behavior on Pyongyang's part. It may have temporarily succeeded; the North Korean ballistic missile launch widely anticipated in October did not occur. But in truth, all Beijing bought with this visit – the highest-level official to come honor the Boy General – was about two months of good (or at least not bad) behavior.

While Liu's visit was somewhat overshadowed by the more prominent image of South Korea's President Park at President Xi's side during China's even grander parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the ending of World War II a month earlier – which apparently gained the ROK zero in terms of gratitude from Beijing – Liu's visit was still seen as a significant warming of the seemingly troubled relationship between the two communist neighbors. That euphoric feeling, to the degree it existed, ended not with a whimper but with a bang. It seems amazing that the man widely proclaimed as "the strongest Chinese leader since Mao" would stand idly by as a third-generation (but clearly not third-rate) dictator thumbs his nose at him from Pyongyang.

Why does Pyongyang behave that way? Because it can! Kim Jong Un, like his father and grandfather before him, seems to believe that China needs North Korea more than it needs China . . . and Chinese actions reinforce this view. While the Chinese love to accuse the US of having a "Cold War mentality," Beijing apparently clings to a 20th century (or earlier) balance of power view where so-called "buffer states" still have geopolitical value. It's time for strategic thinkers in China to enter the 21st century, where cyber capabilities and the Internet (not to mention long-range precision power projection tools) render buffer zones obsolete, before Pyongyang destroys the one thing that China seems to hold most dear: regional peace and stability.

While no one can claim with any degree of certainty what Pyongyang will do next, it's safe to assume that it will continue to test the international community's resolve unless and until there are actual severe consequences. Laying out those consequences in advance – and being prepared to implement them – seems the only way to break the cycle. If not, it will be *deja vu* over and over and over again.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.