

North Korea: defining red lines by Ralph A. Cossa

Ralph A. Cossa (ralph@pacforum.org) is president of Pacific Forum CSIS.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in's admonition to Pyongyang that "perfecting an ICBM, loading an atomic warhead on it and weaponizing it is a red line" has prompted a great deal of debate both in Washington and Seoul, especially since Moon warned that "North Korea is nearing a threshold for the red line." Many pundits have been critical of the ROK president, warning that drawing red lines against DPRK activities has proven to be a hazardous and futile effort.

While this may be true, it is unclear to me how Moon's comments differ significantly from those who claim that Pyongyang reaching that capability is a "game-changer" that demands a strong response. While perhaps a bit more vague, the implication is the same: such a development is intolerable. What's been largely left undefined, however, is what the ROK and US, either jointly (the preferred route) or individually, plan to do about it.

First, let's put the threat in perspective. As others have (correctly) argued (*PacNet* [49](#), [54](#)), militarily speaking, acquisition of such a capability does not significantly change the game as far as deterrence is concerned. We are not, by any stretch of the imagination, facing another Cuban missile crisis – recall the US and USSR were each capable of destroying the earth multiple times over; this was an extreme case of mutually-assured destruction.

Few really believe North Korea can today put a nuclear warhead on a missile and accurately deliver it anywhere, much less against the continental United States. If it tries to do so, then it risks being rapidly removed from the face of the earth, a fact Pyongyang's leaders clearly understand. There is nothing "mutual" about the destruction that would follow a DPRK attack against the US (or for that matter against the ROK, Japan, or US forces based in and around either country). The whole point behind their acquiring nuclear weapons is to enhance their survival, not to bring about certain destruction.

Nonetheless, politically speaking – and war is just politics by other means – both Washington and Seoul have made it clear that North Korea's acquisition of such capabilities is unacceptable and unimaginable. Even if Pyongyang can be successfully be deterred from using this weapon, it may believe it has the US deterred as well and will thus engage in more aggressive actions and/or employ nuclear blackmail techniques. A failure to respond, if and (more likely) when the line is crossed will damage both Moon's and Trump's credibility and only further embolden Kim Jong Un. Something must be done!

One problem with red-line declarations is the (I believe faulty) assumption that the response must be kinetic, that only a military response would be appropriate if a red line is crossed. This should not, and does not have to be, the case. If Washington's and Seoul's warnings are aimed at dissuading Pyongyang from taking that next step, then our next step should be a clear, concise, credible, and coordinated exposition of the consequences . . . along with the willingness to implement such actions if and when then line is crossed.

Threats of "fire, fury and, frankly power the likes of which the world has never seen before" are neither clear, concise, credible, nor coordinated. Nor are red-line pronouncements without any teeth attached. In the immortal words of the recently deposed Steve Bannon, "they got us." Pyongyang feels pretty confident that the US will not initiate a costly and potentially horrendous war that puts Seoul's 25 million citizens at risk to prevent further missile testing. Nor is President Moon likely to give a green light to such a response.

But there is a lot that can and should be said and done to either deter Pyongyang from taking the next step or credibly punish it if and when it does. Thus far our tools of persuasion and dissuasion have been largely economic (ever stronger sanctions which may or may not be strictly enforced) and military (empty threats which are last-resort responses best left to respond to actual acts of violence). But there are a whole range of political and psychological tools that have not yet been effectively employed.

If Washington and Seoul want to truly get Kim Jong Un's attention, they should provide a list of new steps that will be taken in response to future testing or other provocative actions. These should include a resumption of propaganda broadcasts, leaflets, and the like aimed at destabilizing the regime and/or separating Kim from his generals or other members of the ruling elite. More severe financial sanctions, including against Chinese and other companies that have refused to honor United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions, should also be promised. (In this regard, it would be nice if Beijing, instead of complaining about secondary sanctions, made them unnecessary by acting against the violators.)

President Moon should also give assurances, in advance, that the Kaesong Industrial Complex and Kumgang Resort Areas will NEVER be reopened if such activities persist and that other forms of assistance will be taken off the table. The two sides need to closely coordinate to ensure actions taken by one do not undermine actions being taken by the other.

If Seoul and Washington fail to act, here's my prediction about what will happen. Kim Jong Un will continue his testing (of both missiles and nuclear weapons) until he is comfortable that his deterrence capabilities are credible and in place. He will then agree to sit down and discuss a freeze in *testing* (but not in his missile or nuclear programs *per se*; the centrifuges

will keep spinning and static testing will continue unabated). In return, he will seek not only a reduction or elimination of military exercises (which likely represent a bargaining chip he will offer up) but primarily a lifting of sanctions and a resumption of economic and humanitarian assistance so that he can deliver on his *Byungjin* policy's dual promise of economic development and nuclear weapons —and the world will have to live with North Korea as a *de facto* nuclear weapon state with the prospects of nuclear blackmail which are almost certain to follow.

If Trump's "it won't happen" and Moon's red-line pronouncements are merely bluffs, then stand by for them to be challenged. If both countries really want to prevent Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs from reaching their objective, then a clear, concise, credible, and coordinated explanation of what the real consequences would be is long overdue.

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