

## **North Korea vexes US presidential candidates** by Denny Roy

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North Korea's claim of a successful H-bomb test provided an opportunity for the US presidential candidates to demonstrate their expertise on a major policy issue about which they all should have been well-briefed by their handlers. Unfortunately for the country they aspire to lead, their initial comments were less than impressive.

Two points were common to many of the Republican Party candidates. The first was the familiar characterization of the North Korean government as irrational. Billionaire reality show star Donald Trump called DPRK paramount leader Kim Jong-un a "madman." Texas Sen. Ted Cruz said Kim is a "megalomaniac." To Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, Kim is a "lunatic." Perhaps former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee wins the prize for the strongest personal epithet against Kim, referring to him as "North Korea's mega-maniac dictator with the funny haircut." Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul was relatively restrained, noting that "There doesn't seem to be the same rationality in North Korea" as in other nuclear states such as China and Russia. Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Democrat, had a more nuanced view, describing the DPRK as "a paranoid, isolated nation."

Calling Kim crazy displays ignorance of strategy in general and of the North Korea issue in particular. In fact, the DPRK displays remarkable consistency in pursuit of its top-ranked objectives – the very definition of rationality. The North Korean leadership ruthlessly strives for regime security. Fundamentally a small and weak country and acutely aware of its vulnerability to attack or subversion by its arch-enemies South Korea and the United States, the DPRK has purposefully employed a strategy of highly bellicose posturing both to intimidate its external enemies and to appear heroic in the eyes of the North Korean public. One thing that is clear from the behavior of North Korean leaders is that the regime is not suicidal. Yet the image of the DPRK as a crazy state has the potential to warp policy-making, because this image exaggerates the likelihood that Pyongyang's leaders would without provocation launch a nuclear attack against the United States or a US ally – a suicidal act, because the inevitable US retaliation would result in the physical destruction of the regime and the demise of the DPRK. It is disheartening that despite coaching from expert advisers, these candidates for the position of US commander-in-chief either fail to grasp this situation or are unwilling to explain it to voters.

A second common point made by Republican presidential candidates is that North Korea's apparent progress in developing its nuclear weapons is a result of incompetence by the Clinton and Obama administrations. Mentioning both

administrations is a means of expanding the criticism to likely Democratic Party nominee Hillary Clinton, Bill Clinton's first lady and Barack Obama's secretary of state. Getting right to the point, former CEO Carly Fiorina said "North Korea is yet another Hillary Clinton foreign policy failure." Washington under Obama has been allegedly inattentive (Ohio Gov. John Kasich: "asleep at the switch on North Korea") or has shown weakness that emboldened Pyongyang. Cruz said "The Clinton administration led the world in relaxing sanctions against North Korea," inaccurately alleging that this made the DPRK's nuclear weapons program possible. Rubio said the claimed H-bomb test is "just the latest example of the failed Obama-Clinton foreign policy," as "Our enemies around the world are taking advantage of Obama's weakness." Former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush said the test "shows the danger of continuing feckless Obama/Clinton foreign policy" and is "an example of a withdrawn America in the world." New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie said "the problem here is that it's been a weak response by Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton for the last seven years."

It's true that under President Clinton, the US government agreed to a 1994 deal under which the DPRK would freeze and eventually dismantle its nuclear weapons program in exchange for specified economic benefits. That was also the gist of the 2005 agreement under the George W. Bush administration. Both agreements collapsed. The DPRK has been a long-term, vexing problem that neither Republicans nor Democrats have been capable of fixing, much like the Israel-Palestinian issue. There is little point in blaming the Clintons or Obama for North Korean misbehavior. This is essentially a partisan cheap shot. The argument that US "weakness" since 2008 caused Pyongyang to continue its nuclear weapons development is highly dubious. The DPRK had previously decided it needed a nuclear capability to offset its worsening conventional military shortfall relative to South Korea, not to mention Seoul's superpower ally. Pyongyang has proved so determined to keep its nuclear capability that a war to overthrow the regime is the only sure means of denuclearization. Is this what Cruz, Rubio, Bush and Christie are calling for?

When it comes to specific changes in US policy, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul was modest enough to admit, albeit obliquely, that he didn't know what to do about North Korea. "There are no easy solutions," Paul told CNN. "You want me to magically wave a wand and all of a sudden their nuclear weapons are gone?" He sort of knew about sanctions, although not enough to know they have been ineffective. "I think we have placed sanctions before," he said. "We can increase those."

Paul, along with Trump, Cruz and Sanders, said the US should get China to rein in North Korea. This idea may sound like sensible policy, but in reality it is hollow. The US

government has been pressuring Beijing to solve the North Korea problem for years. We've discovered two things. First, the Chinese don't have as much influence over North Korea as US politicians think. Prior to at least the last two DPRK nuclear tests, the Chinese lobbied hard to prevent the tests but failed. Second, the Chinese resist pressing North Korea too hard for fear of losing their influence or inadvertently pushing the regime into a collapse, the outcome the Chinese most hope to avoid. Asking the Chinese to discipline the DPRK is an old idea that has already reached its limit.

The two front-runners deserve special attention. Democrat Hillary Clinton is in an awkward position: as secretary of state from 2009 to 2013, she led US diplomatic policy toward North Korea. Unable to criticize current US policy, she was left to spout tough-sounding but vague generalities such as "We can't give in to or in any way encourage this kind of bullying" and "We will take whatever steps are necessary to defend ourselves and our treaty allies, South Korea and Japan." She did, however, take the opportunity to highlight her opponents' lack of foreign policy-making experience relative to her own. She also reprised the theme that some Republican candidates have advanced spectacular but impractical ideas, such as the Trump/Cruz notion of "carpet bombing" ISIS-occupied areas. Said Clinton, "We cannot afford reckless, imprudent publicity stunts that risk war." She offered, however, no new plan for diverting North Korea's drive to deploy a reliable nuclear-armed ICBM.

Trump's comments on North Korea, in keeping with his style, were devoid of practical policy content. The Chinese, he said, "have total control over North Korea, and China should solve that problem." If Beijing doesn't "solve the problem, we should make trade very difficult with China." Trump seems to be proposing that the United States curtail trade with China over the unprovable proposition that China can shut down DPRK policies we don't like. Trump also demanded that "South Korea is going to have to start ponying up" because "we defend so many countries, we get nothing." Trump seems to be saying that the United States gets no benefit from the US-Korea alliance and that Seoul is free-riding. Both ideas are false. The alliance is one of the pillars that allows the US to be a "resident power" in Asia, enabling Washington to exert influence over what is becoming the world's most important region – a benefit of incalculable value. As for Trump's demand to "start ponying up," South Korea already pays nearly half of the cost of hosting US bases.

Finally, Trump asserts that Kim is "getting too close to doing something," and "would probably use [nuclear weapons]," so "we got to close it down." I am not confident in Trump's ability to assess the DPRK's decision-making regarding the use of nuclear weapons. We all await Trump's explanation of how he intends to successfully "close it down" after the efforts of so many other smart and serious policy-makers have failed to bear fruit.

The assertion of many of the candidates that current US policy is not producing a favorable outcome (a peaceful North Korea that respects international law and human rights) and is not preventing movement toward an unfavorable outcome (DPRK deployment of a reliable nuclear ICBM that can strike

a US city) is correct. Offering a serious assessment of how US policy could better uphold US interests on this very challenging foreign policy issue would distinguish a presidential candidate in a positive way. Even an explanation of why the best of several lousy alternatives is to manage rather than solve the long-running crisis would be welcome. Labelling Pyongyang's leadership crazy and suggesting China would de-nuclearize North Korea at Washington's request is unsatisfactory. This is a missed opportunity for a group of politicians trying desperately to stand out from the crowd.

The long-running North Korea nuclear weapons crisis is not an obscure or insignificant issue. It will likely fall with a heavy thud onto the desk of the next US president, perhaps on multiple occasions. That these candidates exhibit such shallowness on this issue is disappointing for Americans and for friends of America in the Asia-Pacific region.

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