



Response to PacNet #13 “Here we go again!”

Winston Lord served as president of the Council on Foreign Relations, US ambassador to China, and assistant secretary of state for East Asian and Pacific Affairs. He responded via the Nelson Report, which had kindly reprinted PacNet #13.

I fully share your frustration along Yogi Berra lines and your view that the past cycle must be broken with meaningful consequences. Your advance notice idea is intriguing in theory, but I have problems with your specific proposal:

I don't think China would agree to tough sanctions in advance, and, even if it did, you would give North Korea a free pass for this round of provocation in any event. Thus, why not impose the allied-agreed sanctions now, without China and Russia, including bank steps (I hope they are included) that hurt China? Why wait? Moving now is the only way to get China's attention, and maybe even North Korea's attention a la Banco Delta Asia (BDA).

Ralph A. Cossa responds to Winston Lord:

I don't disagree with anything you are saying. It's not either-or. I was addressing the UNSC sanctions. I think we (including the ROK and Japan) should implement our own tough sanctions, including financial ones, as the Congress is doing. But we are three weeks into the UNSC debate and I think we have a greater chance of getting China and Russia to go along with “next steps if” rather than arguing over just how watered down the current sanctions will be.

That's why I think we need to find the lowest common denominator now and then focus on trying to find a higher common denominator to announce in advance of the next act either to try to deter it or to respond more quickly to it; either way sends a more useful message than the one we are sending now; i.e., that Pyongyang's bad behavior drives us apart rather than bringing us together. If China and Russia won't agree to a credible threat of follow-on sanctions to deter future actions (a missile launch for sure and perhaps a fifth nuclear test) then we can squarely blame them for encouraging bad behavior the next time. For what it's worth, I think the South Koreans also need to stop pussy-footing around and ask us to deploy THAAD to the Peninsula, not as a means of pressuring China but as a legitimate self-defense measure.

Winston Lord's following response:

Helpful clarification. I agree strongly on THAAD for three reasons: legitimate self-defense; principle that Seoul, not Beijing, makes this determination; demonstration to China of costs of its North Korean policy.

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Ralph Cossa hits on a key point. Kim Jong Un has broken the code: China is about stability uber alles, and therefore he has license; while the US is not paying attention. So there is no real price to be paid for his bad behavior – short of starting a war. I think that the fourth nuclear test sort of blew up strategic patience.

The problem now is that we don't really have anything the North Koreans want (i.e., worth giving up their nuclear weapons for) and also don't have anything they really value to take away from them. I think your idea of giving them warning is worth doing. But I fear at this point we don't have much credibility with them – Obama's ‘redlines’ and \$2.50 will get you in the door at Starbucks. Given how nuts they went when we did the Banco Delta Asia sanctions – hitting the elites' slush funds and personal bank accounts – I think it is time for the Iran treatment. President Park has hinted at halting Kaesong. If the ROK suspended operations there and looked for other means of curbing hard currency, that would also help raise the pain threshold.

My thought is to have Treasury take away SWIFT – Kim's credit cards – which we can do unilaterally without any legislation (so we have flexibility), and then offer to send a very high-level envoy to Pyongyang to give them a roadmap to removing sanctions: e.g. stop highly enriched uranium (HEU) and plutonium production and allow IAEA inspectors back in = X sanctions removed. Moratorium on missile and nuclear testing = Y sanctions removed, etc.

This might not work, but if not, what will? I haven't heard any better idea yet.

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Kim Jong Un has probably never heard of Yogi Berra, but as Ralph Cossa aptly notes, the North Korean dictator, like his father and grandfather before him, makes Yogi's *déjà vu* quote the joke that keeps on working.

Henry Kissinger was already tired of the routine *back in 2009* when he wrote in the *Washington Post*:

It is time to face realities. This is the 15th year during which the United States has sought to end North Korea's nuclear program through negotiations. These have been conducted in two-party and six-party forums. The result was the same, whatever the framework. In their course, Pyongyang has mothballed its nuclear facilities twice. Each time it ended the moratorium unilaterally. Twice it has tested nuclear explosions and long-range missiles during recesses of negotiations. If this pattern persists, diplomacy will turn into a means of legitimizing proliferation rather than arresting it.

As for the dragon in the room – China’s refusal to apply its unique leverage over North Korea – Ralph says “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.” Kissinger was equally at a loss to explain Beijing’s seemingly inexplicable behavior, offering over the years multiple (and sometime contradictory) rationales.

One explanation never offered is that China’s policy actually *is* working – for North Korea, and for China. We in the West find Beijing’s hands-off approach to Pyongyang’s endless violations and provocations difficult to understand because we judge it to be contrary to China’s own long-term interests *as we see them*. Beijing is happy to oblige us in that conceit.

Yet, the case can be made that Beijing defines its self-interest quite differently, and that, contrary to the West’s confused perception, it sees North Korea’s actions as *supporting* China’s regional and global interests. Consider the ways the Beijing-Pyongyang minuet has benefited China:

- Regime change in North Korea has been taken off the table for six decades and counting.
- China is assured of a Communist buffer against democratic South Korea and the West.
- The North Korea threat distracts Washington’s diplomacy and diverts its strategic planning and resources.
- By comparison to the odious and wild-eyed Kim regimes, Beijing can posture credibly as moderate and responsible despite its own human rights and proliferation misdeeds.
- Beijing, the indispensable player, parlays its leverage over Pyongyang into leverage over Washington and the West on a range of regional and international issues.

After Secretary of State John Kerry’s stern warning that China’s old approach is no longer acceptable, he visited Beijing and met for four hours with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi. After all that talk, a grim-faced Kerry briefed the press and reported absolutely no progress on the specifics of responding to Pyongyang’s latest blatant act of defiance.

Nevertheless, Kerry stated:

Let me emphasize the United States and China are united in our opposition to North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, and we agree – both of us – on the imperative of achieving a denuclearized Korean Peninsula. And you heard Foreign Minister Wang reiterate that on behalf of China a moment ago. It’s good to agree on the goal, but it’s not enough to agree on the goal. We believe we need to agree on the meaningful steps necessary to get to the achievement of the goal – to the negotiations that result in denuclearization.

And we look forward to working with China, which China agreed today to do, to engage in an accelerated effort at the United Nations, instructing both of our representatives to work together to try to achieve an understanding about

the strong resolution that introduces significant new measures to curtail North Korea’s ability to advance its prescribed nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

Kerry then met with Xi Jinping and presumably delivered the same message.

Wang and Xi may not know Yogi Berra either, but after Kerry left, there may have been some Chinese chuckling behind closed doors about the latest manifestation of ongoing US gullibility. Let’s hope that the other part of Kerry’s message – a stern warning that the US will proceed unilaterally if necessary to defend itself against North Korea’s growing nuclear and missile threat – finally makes “all over again” finally over. Otherwise, we can simply substitute China for North Korea in Ralph’s pertinent question: Why does Beijing behave that way? Because it can!

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