

Response to PacNet #30 “Launch the Perry Process 2” by Robert A. Manning and James Przystup

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We appreciate both the frustration behind, and the intent of, Brad Glosserman’s “Launch the Perry Process 2” (*PacNet* #30) calling for a major review of US policy toward North Korea. But we respectfully disagree. As Karl Marx pointed out, history repeats itself, first as tragedy, the second time as farce.

It is not obvious to us what a policy review would produce – even if you had George Kennan himself overseeing it. We have 25 years of trial and (no small amount of) error in trying to resolve the North Korea nuclear problem. It is difficult to believe that the problem is a deficit of imagination or creativity.

Beginning in 1991 with the first Bush administration, we tried, sending then Undersecretary of State Arnold Kanter to meet with very senior North Koreans. He proposed the basic tradeoff in general terms: give up your nuclear program and receive an array of security guarantees and economic benefits.

That eventually played out into the 1994 Agreed Framework, which offered Pyongyang two light-water reactors, a security guarantee, and moves toward normalized relations. To be fair, the profound distrust and perceived violations on both sides gradually unraveled that accord.

That led to the Perry Process, which was mandated by Congress, in an effort to salvage the Agreed Framework. Bill Perry was a fine choice and did a superb job. In the end, he offered North Korea the idea of more for more, with each side taking parallel actions leading to a grand bargain. That began to fizzle when Pyongyang failed to provide adequate verification of its missile program.

Finally, in 2002, when the US discovered that Pyongyang was secretly pursuing uranium enrichment as an alternative path to a bomb and called them on it, the Agreed Framework collapsed.

Then the Six-Party Talks were launched. That led to the Sept. 19, 2005 agreement – yet another attempt at a grand bargain. That collapsed when North Korea failed to provide verification of nuclear activities.

Enter the Obama administration. The president began by offering to extend a hand to North Korea. For his good will, he got punched in the face, as North Korea answered with ballistic missile and nuclear weapon tests. Nonetheless, US diplomats persevered, and the result was the Feb. 29, 2012 agreement: a mini bargain that offered food for freezing North Korean missile and enrichment programs and a pledge to return to the 2005 accord. But North Korea held another ballistic missile test, and that ended that.

We fear that behind the call for yet another review is an American conceit – the belief that every problem has a solution and that more dialogue leads to better understanding.

This is not the case. In fact, we understand each other all too well. That is a large part of the reason for our current impasse. North Korea understands what we want and the benefits that would accrue to them if they cooperate. This is the reason for our current impasse. Pyongyang has no interest in buying what we’re selling. North Korea has avoided Chinese-type reforms, fearing they would undermine the regime. It has tolerated small-scale markets and modest reforms that it can control and which preserve the regime. It has no interest in opening the country in ways that might threaten the Kim family dynasty.

To secure the dynasty, North Korea has been beavering away on its nuclear and missile development programs for nearly four decades. The nuclear program, enshrined in its 2012 constitution, has become part of its national identity. Under Kim Jong Un, the regime has declared the *byungjin* policy, a two-track approach featuring development of its nuclear arsenal and economic growth.

Never mind that it cannot succeed. As a rogue nuclear state under UN sanctions and lacking any semblance of a legal order, the needed large-scale foreign investment will not come. But North Korean interlocutors have said clearly and repeatedly that they have no interest in trading in their nuclear arsenal.

PacNet #30 reflects a growing sentiment in the policy community that the Obama administration’s policy of strategic patience and openness to dialogue is not working and that accordingly we must “do something.”

We disagree. Yes, North Korea is dangerous and its increasingly capable missile and nuclear weapons program make them more so, especially under the rule of an erratic spoiled brat. But the basic deterrence equation still holds: North Korea is not al-Qaeda. The leadership’s highest priority is regime survival, not suicide. This will remain true if they operationalize the KN08 mobile ICBM and multiply the number of nuclear weapons they possess.

There is no need for a major policy review. The policy choices are clear: continue on the present course, hoping Kim

will be persuaded to trade his nukes for some package of goodies and security guarantees. We can attack them and change the regime – something that four US presidents have ruled out – or we can recognize North Korea as a nuclear weapon state and offer to drop sanctions if it negotiates arms control limits. Pyongyang would be happy to negotiate on that basis. But there is no political support for accepting Pyongyang as a nuclear weapon state and treating it as a normal country in the US, ROK, or Japan, and we doubt China would buy it either.

If you want to change policy, as Obama did with Cuba, just do it. But we see no point in spending taxpayers' money on a lengthy policy review. Not all problems have solutions. Sometimes you can only manage them. North Korea (which, by the way, is not forever) is one of them. Like Kennan with the Soviet Union, we need to play the long game with North Korea.

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