

Response to PacNet #30R “Launch the Perry Process 2” by Joseph A. Bosco

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In *PacNet* #30R, Robert Manning and James Przystup say they disagree with Brad Glosserman’s argument in *PacNet* #30 “that the Obama administration’s policy of strategic patience and openness to dialogue is not working and that accordingly we must ‘do something.’”

Actually, the only part of that thesis they dispute is the call for consideration of a new approach, not the assessment that the Obama policy is ineffective. They describe the equal failures of initiatives launched over the previous 18 years by the Bush I, Clinton, and Bush II administrations. Given that accurate and useful history, they conclude that since nothing tried heretofore has worked, further official grasping at a solution would be a futile waste of time and taxpayers’ money.

We just have to learn, if not to love the North Korean bomb, at least to accept it as an unpleasant reality of the 21st century. Meanwhile, we should just keep trying to contain the danger and hope that Pyongyang eventually will accept the West’s offer of security guarantees and generous economic benefits in exchange for denuclearization. Yet they also say that North Korea’s nuclear program, “enshrined in its 2012 constitution, has become part of its national identity.”

The authors readily concede that “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.” Henry Kissinger has described a nuclear-armed North Korea in even starker terms, noting that “The spread of these weapons into hands not restrained by the historical and political considerations of the major states augurs a world of devastation and human loss without precedent even in our age of genocidal killings.”

Manning and Przystup may be right that an exhaustive and expensive new policy study is not needed, but not as they suggest because everything has already been tried and found not to work. Instead, the solution has been hiding in plain sight all along but has never been seriously pursued by any administration: the pivotal role of China as enabler and protector of North Korea’s nuclear and missile programs, indeed, as the willing regime preservationist.

While all administrations have recognized China’s unique sustaining relationship with Pyongyang and have often pleaded with Beijing to do more to restrain its bizarre and

reckless ally, they have all acquiesced when it insists that it cannot do more lest pressure cause the regime to disintegrate. That would mean a flood of refugees across China’s border, unification with democratic South Korea, and loss of the buffer against a hostile United States. From Beijing’s perspective, it is better to keep in power an odious, deranged, nuclear-armed, and viscerally anti-West ally.

Putting aside the respective merits of those arguments – would newly-liberated North Koreans really want to leave at that point? Is a unified, democratic Korean Peninsula truly a threat to a peaceful China? – one has to question the premise of Beijing’s dire prediction: why, in the face of a genuine and credible Chinese ultimatum for Pyongyang to denuclearize or collapse, would it choose the latter? After all, the authors unequivocally state: “The leadership’s highest priority is regime survival, not suicide.” But Beijing has never seriously confronted the Kim family with that existential dilemma.

Contrary to China’s representation that it shares Western concerns about a nuclear North Korea, in fact, its unruly neighbor has served Chinese strategic interests. It has been a major national security and foreign policy distraction for Washington. Simultaneously, it has bestowed on Beijing the mantle of good-faith negotiating partner and responsible stakeholder, thereby providing it major leverage on a range of other bilateral and multilateral issues.

It is long past time to call China’s hand on North Korea, especially as Beijing increasingly lays bare its own hostility to the international order in the South and East China Seas (and probably soon again in the Taiwan Strait).

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