



Dealing with North Korea by Ralph A. Cossa

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What is North Korea up to? Is it trying to undermine the Six-Party Talks in order to force Washington to deal with Pyongyang directly, as some experts claim? Or, as others maintain with equal certainty, is it sending a signal that it is not interested in talks at all, given current domestic political uncertainties surrounding the poor health of “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il and his efforts to elevate his third son as the heir-apparent? Or is Pyongyang merely laying the groundwork for eventual talks, but only on its terms, which include acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state? The real answer is probably some combination of all of the above but the truthful answer is we really don’t know; when it comes to understanding North Korean motives, we’re all guessing.

Guessing about North Korea’s objectives should not preclude Washington and its other dialogue partners – South Korea, China, Japan, and Russia – from being clear about what our objectives are. The primary objective is not, as is all too frequently implied, to get Pyongyang back to the six-party negotiating table. The Six-Party Talks are one – perhaps still the best but not the only – means of achieving our common long-term objective, which should and must remain the complete, verifiable, irreversible elimination of all North Korean nuclear weapons programs. The major stumbling block is that Pyongyang has clearly and repeatedly asserted that it has no intention of giving up its nuclear arsenal any time soon (if ever).

This presents the Obama administration and its interlocutors with a dual challenge: first and foremost to contain the threat posed by North Korea’s nuclear weapons capabilities; then to persuade Pyongyang that giving up these weapons is the best way to ensure its own survival.

First things first! The most immediate near-term objective is not only to keep North Korea from using its nuclear arsenal, but also to keep what’s currently in North Korea in North Korea and to keep anything else that would help the regime develop its nuclear or missile capabilities out.

The first half of this task is the easier one. Surely Pyongyang realizes that using a nuclear weapon against the U.S., South Korea, Japan, or anyone else is likely to draw an American military response “using all available means.” Secretary of Defense Robert Gates emphasized this point at the recent Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore when he noted that the U.S. “will not stand idly by” in the face of North Korean provocations: “We unequivocally reaffirm our commitment to the defense of our allies in the region,” he declared, further asserting that Pyongyang would be held “fully accountable” for its actions. If survival is a key North

Korean objective – and this is the only objective upon which virtually all the experts agree – it will not do anything that is clearly suicidal.

Containing North Korea’s nuclear capabilities – keeping its weapons of mass destruction (which reportedly include chemical and perhaps even biological as well as nuclear weapons) out of the hands of others (including terrorist groups) that might be more inclined to use them – is a more difficult task which the United States cannot do alone. There is a vehicle in place for achieving this objective: United Nations Security Council Resolution 1718, which prohibits the movement in or out of North Korea of such weapons and components. UNSC members are currently meeting to discuss ways of strengthening this resolution in the wake of last week’s North Korean nuclear weapons test (which has already been condemned as a clear violation of UNSCR 1718, as was its early April long-range missile test).

At a minimum, one hopes that the list of prohibited items will be expanded to include all military-related hardware and equipment. But the key will not be merely strengthening sanctions but actually enforcing them. This will require close monitoring of all land shipments going into or coming out of North Korea by its immediate neighbors – something China and Russia have been reluctant to do in the past – and the inspection of all shipping into and out of North Korea whenever these ships make port calls anywhere in the world. Such measures are not “declarations of war” as Pyongyang frequently claims, but a sovereign right that is reinforced by UNSCR 1718. (Stopping and inspecting ships on the high seas may also become necessary and should be authorized under a new and improved version of UNSCR 1718 but may not be necessary as a first step.)

Such action will also help, over time, to achieve the long-term objective of persuading the North that the consequences of having nuclear weapons outweigh the current perceived benefits of going down this path. As one former senior U.S. official noted somewhat impolitely but all too accurately, “we have taught this puppy that it is OK to pee on the rug.” By now the cycle is all too predictable. North Korea behaves outrageously. The others provide generous incentives to get it to come back to the table. It returns, reaps the benefits, and then once again behaves outrageously and waits for the incentives to once again be offered. This cycle must be broken.

The main task now is not to get the North to return to negotiations but to demonstrate that bad behavior has serious, enforceable, and long-lasting consequences. The elimination of Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons capabilities will be a multi-stage process. Tightening the noose around Pyongyang to increase the political, military, and economic costs associated

with going down the nuclear path is a long overdue vital first step in this process.