



Asia Pacific Bulletin

EastWestCenter.org/APB

Number 379 | April 26, 2017

North Korea Policy: Failure is the Only Option

BY DENNY ROY

As many analysts have pointed out, US policy towards North Korea is “failing.” It is true that Pyongyang has declined the US/South Korean offer to give up its nuclear weapons in exchange for economic opportunities and upgraded political relations. Instead, the North Korean government remains intensely hostile towards Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo, and continues making progress towards deploying a nuclear-tipped intercontinental ballistic missile — a frightening prospect.

This US policy “failure,” however, stems from several unique circumstances. By all indications, the North Koreans plan to keep their nuclear weapons and are not open to bargaining them away. Acquiring nuclear weapons was perhaps the only major accomplishment of the late “Dear Leader” Kim Jong-il (father of current leader Kim Jong-un), under whom the country suffered severe economic austerity. Pyongyang seems to believe that entering the nuclear club will bring military security and transform relations with the United States. Pyongyang’s ability to defy the much more powerful United States is a consequence of the North Koreans holding Seoul hostage. The South Korean capital is within range of a massive collection of North Korean artillery and rocket batteries poised to rain down destruction in retaliation for any possible military action by the United States or South Korea. Finally, a rapprochement with North Korea may well be simply impossible no matter what America says or does, because Pyongyang sees peace as a mortal danger to the regime. The Kim Dynasty seems to prefer a constant state of high tensions. The specter of a powerful, unremitting enemy provides an excuse for the country’s lack of prosperity and allows the government to claim credit for scaring off allegedly imminent American attacks year after year. The expectation that the superpower United States should always be able to impose its preferred solution upon international strategic problems is unrealistic. As multiple historians have observed, “The power to destroy is not the power to control.”

Three observations explain why the continued “failure” of US policy is likely.

First, the only sure way to end the North Korean nuclear program is to oust the regime. Given the regime’s commitment to keeping its nuclear weapons, it is doubtful Pyongyang would give them up even under much tougher economic sanctions. The regime might collapse before Pyongyang relented. If they did cry uncle and agree to talk about de-nuclearizing under the condition that sanctions

Denny Roy, Senior Fellow at the East-West Center, explains that “The expectation that the superpower United States should always be able to impose its preferred solution upon international strategic problems is unrealistic.”

The East-West Center promotes better relations and understanding among the people and nations of the United States, Asia, and the Pacific through cooperative study, research, and dialogue. Established by the US Congress in 1960, the Center serves as a resource for information and analysis on critical issues of common concern, bringing people together to exchange views, build expertise, and develop policy options.

Asia Pacific Bulletin | April 26, 2017

“North Korea will eventually get its nuclear missile. Both sides will then discover this is not much of a ‘game-changer.’”

The *Asia Pacific Bulletin* (APB) series is produced by the East-West Center in Washington.

APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of the East-West Center or any organization with which the author is affiliated.

first be removed, North Korean technicians would likely continue working on deliverable nuclear weapons surreptitiously.

Second, the United States government and its allies cannot oust the regime. Of course Washington wields “the power to destroy” the regime, but the costs would be unacceptable. The North Koreans would manage to fire enough rounds at Seoul to kill thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of South Korean civilians. If the North Korean leadership believed their political and physical survival was under threat, the usual inhibitions against using their nuclear weapons would no longer apply. Understandably, South Koreans will not want to hasten unification if it means part of the Korean Peninsula will be radioactive for hundreds of years.

Political subversion is a less risky way to attempt regime change. Efforts to infiltrate counter-propaganda into North Korea are already underway. But this will almost certainly not produce substantial results before Pyongyang fields a nuclear missile. A basic problem is that the only groups that could pull off a coup d'état — the military and the elites in Pyongyang — both benefit from keeping the Kim family in power.

Third, China is not the solution. American conventional wisdom holds that since China supplies North Korea with energy, food and cash, Beijing has the power to turn off Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons and missile programs at will by withholding necessities until the North Koreans comply. The Chinese both will not and cannot exert decisive pressure on the North Koreans. They will not because they fear inadvertently causing regime collapse, an outcome they consider worse than a nuclear-armed North Korea; they cannot because when they push hard, the North Koreans tend to angrily defy Chinese wishes, as was evident in China’s inability to prevent each of North Korea’s nuclear tests. In all likelihood, China would not support regime overthrow except in extreme circumstances: if the Chinese believe the United States military is preparing to attack North Korea, if such an attack is in progress, or if North Korea uses a nuclear weapon against an adversary. But the USA is deterred against initiating an attack for the reasons cited above, and North Korea is deterred from starting a war because the regime is not suicidal.

Tougher sanctions are worth trying, and subversion efforts should continue. We should expect, however, that North Korea will eventually get its nuclear missile. Both sides will then discover this is not much of a “game-changer.” Pyongyang will not gain improved treatment from its adversaries, and Americans will go about their business under the protection not only of anti-missile defenses, but the deterrent effect of America’s own nuclear arsenal upon the North Koreans.