

He Huffs and He Puffs

North Korea's Dear Leader Threatens to Explode a Nuke

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Here we are again. Kim Jong Il is doing what we have come to expect of him: threatening the world and engaging in nuclear brinkmanship. And this time the Dear Leader is declaring his regime's intention to test an actual nuclear weapon.

Last July, ignoring the warnings of the United States and other members of the six party talks, Kim Jong Il decided to test several short- and long-range missiles. No one besides our closest ally in Asia, Japan, seemed to care much, and the international response was far softer than what Tokyo proposed. Kim was slapped with sanctions prohibiting the sale of nuclear and missile materials. Japan went forward with its own broader unilateral sanctions, and, clearly dissatisfied with the international and American responses, mused aloud about the need for a nuclear-strike capability.

But all Kim Jong Il had to do was wait for the huffing and puffing to peter out. By September, Washington was offering Pyongyang one-on-one talks and "flexibility" on sanctions currently in place to keep North Korea from trafficking in counterfeit money. These sanctions have clearly hurt the cash-strapped regime, which lives off a combination of criminal activity and extorted foreign aid. And yet, Washington's concessions, apparently, were not good enough for the Dear Leader.

Kim has decided to up the ante and threaten to test a nuclear weapon. Another round of threats has ensued. A very provocative act, said Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. "Bad news," according to the E.U.'s Javier Solana. But why should Kim worry about consequences? U.S. and Japanese efforts to get the United Nations to express disapproval in advance of a test--a simple warning of Chapter 7 actions that could lead to tougher sanctions and the use of force--have already been rebuffed by North Korea's "protectors," as Ambassador John Bolton calls China and Russia.

Reasonable people may ask, Why is Kim escalating when he is so close to getting what he wants? There are plenty of possible motivations. Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe is set to visit South Korea in October on a fence-mending trip. A Japanese-South Korean rapprochement would be a major blow to Kim's strategy of weakening America's Asian alliances. Perhaps Kim is peeved that Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the Philippines joined Japan, South Korea, and the United States (Russia and China sat out) at a recent meeting in New York on the North Korean nuclear crisis. Maybe the paranoid leader is upset by signs that the U.S.-South Korea relationship may be fixable?

There is also the Iran factor. Kim and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad seem to be studying each other's moves. The Iranian president wants his own six party-like process, which would allow him also to build up his country's nuclear arsenal while extracting all the benefits of diplomacy with the big boys. Just like Kim. And it was soon after Iran was rewarded for

its own provocations by an offer of goodies from the E.U. and America that Kim tested his missiles this summer. Perhaps Kim also desires the respect Ahmadinejad has received. The Iranian president got to speak in New York at the United Nations and the citadel of the foreign policy establishment, the Council on Foreign Relations. He was even on the cover of Time.

Of course, no one really knows what Kim is after, besides survival, which nuclear weapons will buy him for a while. But he has also learned that brinkmanship and escalation work. Why not continue and see what else he can get, especially from Seoul and Beijing?

The United States last week warned privately and publicly that "we are not going to live with a nuclear North Korea." But we have said that before, and we have been living with a nuclear North Korea for quite some time. Besides, what actions will we take to not "live with a nuclear North Korea"?

Proponents of more diplomacy argue that, had the United States pursued a more rigorous diplomacy, we could have convinced China and South Korea, once diplomacy failed, to support a more coercive approach. But Beijing's geopolitical calculation--a nuclear North Korea may not be so bad when compared with the alternative of a unified Korea allied with Washington--precludes getting tough with Kim. And the growing pains of South Korea's immature democracy have complicated Washington's attempts to work with it on the North Korea issue.

Even worse, the "more-diplomacy" argument overlooks the basic truth about our North Korea problem, which is that we are willing to live with a nuclear North Korea, because the alternative is a major war. In which case, our policy should be based on the premise that we will be living with a nuclear North Korea until the Kim regime is gone. Such a policy requires first getting ourselves out of the six party talks, so we can focus on defending ourselves and reassuring our nervous allies Japan and South Korea that our nuclear umbrella will protect them.

We also have other means of deterring the Dear Leader, mitigating his threats, and working toward his eventual demise. Unrelenting pressure can be put on the trade in illicit goods that keeps Kim's regime alive. We can adopt a more robust nuclear posture in Asia. We can mitigate the artillery threat to Seoul through counter-battery weaponry. We can intensify our Proliferation Security Initiative activities, and place a quarantine and inspection regime on ships moving to and from North Korea. We can also accelerate the deployment of missile defenses to our regional allies. We can launch an international campaign to ameliorate human rights abuses and absorb refugees, and so on.

But a continued policy of conference diplomacy and empty threats will give us the worst of all worlds: more nuclear weapons in North Korea and more alliance problems with South Korea and Japan. The lesson we should be teaching Pyongyang is that breaking your commitment to non-nuclearization leads not to concession after concession, but to

isolation, pressure, and the uncomfortable position of having a nuclear arsenal pointed at you.

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