Rob York, November 20th, 2015

If North Korea will never give up its nukes, what can the U.S. do?

Acknowledging Pyongyang’s determination to keep its weapons, experts suggest patient approach

If the North Korean leadership and media are clear on anything, it’s that their nuclear weapons are here to stay.

Efforts in recent years by both the United States and South Korea – as well as China and Russia, to an extent – to reverse the North’s nuclear push have been rebuffed. Time and again the North insists that its nukes are essential to its survival, and the U.S. insists that recognition of the North as a nuclear power is a non-starter.

So where does the U.S. go from here if it wishes to manage the problem? A panel of U.S.-based experts suggest that the should keep to its position of no recognition for the North, but address the problem on an incremental and patient basis. This may not solve the problem outright, they note, but can help make it smaller and less serious.

In part 21 of a new NK News expert interview series, American experts who talked to NK News included:

- Bruce Klingner, Senior Research Fellow, Northeast Asia Asian Studies Center, Heritage Foundation
- Darcie Draudt, Non-Resident James A. Kelly Fellow, Pacific Forum CSIS and Doctoral Candidate, Johns Hopkins University, Department of Political Science
Q21) North Korea has stated that it will never abandon its nuclear weapons program and will not use its nukes as a bargaining chip. Whether true or not, do you believe that the U.S. has any viable policy options to denuclearize North Korea or has that time now passed? If so, what are the implications?
It has not been a secret to some of us for quite a long period of time that the North Korean government has placed a supreme priority on the acquisition and perfection of a nuclear arsenal and for the delivery systems for using it to threaten its main imagined adversaries. So if it is the case that the North Korean nuclear threat and the real existing North Korean state are one and the same, this leads to a rather unpleasant set of policy options.

Perhaps the least unpleasant under the existing conditioned environment is to think about how to make the current North Korean problem into a smaller North Korean problem. Which is to say, thinking about strategy to make the North Korean potential for threat and menace to its adversaries littler, rather than larger, over the years ahead. I’ve written quite a bit about this, and my view is to say this would require a complicated, coherent, patient set of approaches by Washington, involving allies and possible other partners.

There’s no way of sugarcoating it. It’s a very difficult, dangerous and risky situation we face with North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.

It’s a very difficult, dangerous and risky situation we face with North Korea’s nuclear ambitions.

It is wrong to believe that the United States can – by tweaking incentives – change fundamental features of the North Korean political economy. This is a fallacy, in my view, both of those committed to engagement and those who would like to ratchet up sanctions.

The U.S. should and has left the door to negotiations open if the North Korean authorities would like to pursue them. But in the interim, the main task at hand is to limit the risks North Korea poses by maintaining the deterrent on the Korean Peninsula and assuring that the country does not engage in proliferation activities.

Although China has to date shown little serious inclination to move North Korea to the bargaining table, it is worth reminding Beijing that North Korea is a strategic liability and an issue on which the two countries could cooperate. The U.S. should also support initiatives by the South to reach out to the North as President Park (Geun-hye) has at least somewhat more bargaining space than President Obama does.

It is worth reminding Beijing that North Korea is a strategic liability and an issue on which the two countries could cooperate.

**STEPH. HAGGARD**
All instruments of national power should be used simultaneously in conjunction with each other as part of a comprehensive, integrated strategy to influence the behavior of other nations. Not fully utilizing any element of national power reduces the effectiveness of U.S. foreign policy. One of these tools is sanctions, including targeted financial measures, which are punitive measures intended to deter, coerce and compel changes in another country’s policy and behavior.

President Obama asserted that North Korea “is the most isolated, the most sanctioned, the most cut-off nation on Earth.” That is simply not true. The U.S., the European Union, and the U.N. imposed far more pervasive and compelling measures against Iran, which was a major factor in Tehran returning to the negotiating table.

Secretary of State John Kerry declared international intent to “increase the pressure and increase the potential of either sanctions or other means” to alter Kim Jong Un’s behavior. Bold words calling for bold action. However, the Obama administration has vowed for years that it is contemplating additional sanctions measures but instead pursued a policy of timid incrementalism.

Washington has targeted fewer North Korean entities than those of the Balkans, Burma, Cuba, Iran and Zimbabwe

The Obama Administration has been pulling its punches toward North Korea by not even fully implementing existing U.S. law. Washington has targeted fewer North Korean entities than those of the Balkans, Burma, Cuba, Iran and Zimbabwe. The U.S. has sanctioned more than twice as many Zimbabwean entities than it has North Korean entities.

In February 2014, the UN Commission of Inquiry concluded that Pyongyang had committed human rights violations so egregious as to qualify as crimes against humanity. To date, the Obama administration has targeted zero North Korean entities for human rights violations. By contrast, the U.S. targeted Zimbabwe, Congo and Burma for human rights violations and sanctioned by name the presidents of Zimbabwe and Belarus.
The hard reality is that North Korea is very unlikely willingly to abandon nuclear weapons under its current regime. Experts continue to debate whether Pyongyang might have been prepared, a decade or more ago, to negotiate away its nuclear weapons. Now, however, after its nuclear and missile tests and declaring itself in its constitution to be a nuclear weapons state, no serious expert thinks it will. Thus, diplomacy is not currently an option.

But no regime, especially one such as North Korea, is immune to change. If the international community continues not to accept North Korea as a legitimate nuclear weapons state, eventually there will be positive political change in the country. Whether this will occur sooner or later, and whether it will be gradual or involve dramatic developments, remains to be seen. The United States must and, I believe, will be firm, principled and prudent until Pyongyang is actually prepared to engage in genuine negotiations.

the burden is on the critics to detail an alternative policy that better promotes U.S. and international community interests

The international community must gradually and carefully ratchet up the pressure on North Korea to make the right decision while making it clear that it is always open to genuine negotiations, just as the Obama administration has done. Critics say that this does not take into account the mounting danger of Pyongyang’s increasingly large and sophisticated nuclear arsenal. But here the burden is on the critics to detail an alternative policy that better promotes U.S. and international community interests. They have not done so.

The North Korean regime sees the program as both a deterrent and an existential legitimation. To this end, any U.S. policy that would be successful in addressing North Korea’s nuclear program will
need to assuage its fears of attack and give it an off-ramp that doesn’t undercut its domestic reputation. While difficult, a strategy that works for these two ends is not impossible.

Sanctions and the refusal of food aid and other forms of humanitarian assistance may serve to goad the regime toward acquiescing to a reversal of its program, as the country becomes increasingly cut off from global flows of goods and struggles to meet its citizens’ practical needs. In the past, aid and trade have been used to reward good behavior, and under future circumstances, a constrained Pyongyang without the ability to support its populace may be willing to come back to the table, despite claiming its nuclear program is not a bargaining chip.

For its aims to ensure safety, stability, and adherence to international laws and norms, the United States should not accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state

For its aims to ensure safety, stability, and adherence to international laws and norms, the United States should not accept North Korea as a nuclear weapons state. The North Korean leadership has repeatedly threatened the United States and its allies and, disinterested in abiding by IAEA safeguards, Pyongyang’s program and its vociferous claims of willingness to use them, even preemptively, poses a threat to the United States and its neighbors. Moreover, the DPRK’s withdrawal from the NPT has larger implications for the global non-proliferation regime that no state interested in stability, including the United States, should accept.

*Headline image: U.S. Navy, modified by NK News*