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Nuclear Test Calls for Active Intolerance of North Korean Regime

Michael A. Needham

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has once again raised the stakes in its showdown with the rest of the world by announcing it successfully conducted a test of a nuclear weapon on October 8. It is not a surprise that the DPRK has a nuclear weapon—United States intelligence estimates have shown for some time now that the DPRK possesses at least one or two nuclear weapons and enough nuclear material for many more weapons. Nonetheless, if a nuclear test did occur, that test is both provocative and intolerable. In response to the test, the U.S. and its allies must extend a comprehensive offensive and defensive deterrent policy to the Korean peninsula.

Kim Jong-Il's interests in pursuing a nuclear test include intimidating American allies in Japan and South Korea, further impairing the U.S. alliance with South Korea, and putting pressure on the United States. His behavior flies in the face of clear messages from the United Nations as well as key stakeholders in international stability. For the last year, North Korea has refused to rejoin the Six Party Talks, negotiations between North Korea, the United States, China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia aimed at solving the North Korean nuclear issue. Coupled with its refusal to participate in the Six Party Talks, the nuclear test amplifies the oft-stated point that North Korea has never had any interest in good faith negotiations. Rather, North Korea's consistent approach has been to keep the responsible world tied up at the bargaining table while the regime builds its nuclear weapons program.

President Bush, in his first State of the Union address after the September 11 terrorist attacks, made clear the threat a nuclear-armed North Korea would pose to the United States. "By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States. In any of these cases, the price of indifference would be catastrophic," he said. "The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons."

President Bush's analysis underscores the reasons it is intolerable for North Korea to have the weapons Kim Jong-Il has now shown the world he possesses. The gravest threat, however, is that Kim Jong-Il will overestimate the leverage he has gained and behave recklessly as a result. In fact, he has gained very little new leverage on the rest of the world. Rather, he has further isolated himself by aggressively ignoring an international consensus that a North Korean nuclear test is intolerable.

Kim Jong-Il may believe that a successful nuclear test provides him with a safety blanket from under

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which he may lash out at the region and cause greater instability. American policymakers need to be conscious of this potential miscalculation on Kim Jong-Il's part. In reality, the strategic calculus in East Asia has long contained the possibility of a devastating North Korean attack on American allies South Korea and Japan—whether that attack comes from conventional rockets and missiles or from the use of weapons of mass destruction.

The first, and most important, step is to make it clear to Pyongyang that a successful nuclear test does not give it any significant new leverage in international affairs. The calculus of a nuclear North Korea has already been factored into international strategic thinking. A toughly-worded, Chapter VII resolution from the U.N. Security Council demanding the DPRK suspend its missile and WMD programs is an important first step.

Furthermore, America must be prepared to defend itself, its allies, and its key interests from North Korean attack or blackmail. Accordingly, America must extend a comprehensive offensive and defensive deterrent policy to the Korean peninsula. On the offensive side, America must make absolutely clear that the use or sale of nuclear weapons by North Korea will have devastating consequences to the regime. America cannot and will not tolerate nuclear weapons being used against our nation, allies, or interests, nor their sale to entities which may use them in such a manner.

Defensively, the United States must commit to funding and implementing a fully functioning, comprehensive ballistic missile defense system. The United States currently has a very limited capability to shoot down ICBMs. Congress and the Administration should immediately revisit the Global Protection Against Limited Strikes (GPALS) proposal made in 1991 by the then-director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization, Ambassador Henry F. Cooper, and current National Security Advisor Stephen J. Hadley. The GPALS system could engage up to 200 individual missile reentry vehicles and destroy ICBMs such as the Taepodong 2. In the next few years, North Korea will likely have the capability to strike the United States; the United States must develop a defensive capability able to protect itself from Pyongyang's unpredictable behavior.

Finally, North Korea's belligerence poses a direct threat to the American national security strategy of preventing the world's most dangerous regimes from possessing the world's most dangerous weapons. Accordingly, the United States and its allies must make it absolutely clear that it cannot and does not tolerate North Korean nuclear weapons or nuclear testing and will actively work to reverse these programs. The U.S. should engage in a policy of active regime intolerance. America has already engaged in several tactics to put pressure on the North Korean regime, specifically financial measures to counter DPRK currency counterfeiting and the proliferation security initiative to prevent the proliferation of WMD and their delivery systems. In light of the North Korean provocation, America and other responsible stakeholders in a peaceful and stable global order must go further.

Specifically, the U.S. should work with the U.N. Security Council to get comprehensive sanctions backed by international community; work with its allies and China to enforce a blockade on all North Korean exports; impose further multilateral economic sanctions, including cutting off all fuel going into North Korea from China and elsewhere; and pressure the over 70 nations with diplomatic ties to the DPRK to sever those relations immediately. Finally, no country should accept the legitimacy of the North Korean regime or its policies. The world and North Koreans would be far better off without Kim Jong-Il as a leader. The United States, its partners in the Six Party talks, and the international community as a whole should aim to give the North Korean people an alternative.

All eyes now turn towards China. Until now, China's enthusiasm for applying real pressure on their North Korean ally has been tepid, at best. Moreover, China has long served as a transit point for North Korean proliferation and other illicit behavior. China claims to be a responsible stakeholder in the existing international system. Now is China's opportunity to choose whether to continue as an enabler of the world's rogue states or to become a "responsible stakeholder" in a stable international system.

North Korea's nuclear test significantly raises the stakes in Asia, but does not fundamentally alter the

strategic calculus that has been in place for years. America and other responsible stakeholders in the world need to articulate to the North Korean regime that they are not intimidated by its behavior, they will actively institute a combination of offensive and defensive military options to protect

their interests from this gathering threat, and they will engage in a policy of active regime intolerance towards the North Korean regime.

Michael A. Needham is Director of the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.