

Taking Away Kim Jong-Il's Nuclear Toys

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A few countries have sensibly backed away from their nuclear ambitions. The world is trying to figure out how to get Kim to do the same thing.

Most of the world is now preoccupied with getting the North Korean genie back in the bottle – trying through the threat of sanctions to force Kim Jong-Il to abandon his nuclear program.

So far, Kim has resisted all attempts to rein him in. With Japan having instituted a unilateral complete blockade of North Korea and the Americans seeking similar action in the United Nations today and even its benefactor China making unpleasant noises, it is still questionable whether any international diplomatic pressure is going to have any effect.

But despite the widely held belief that once a country goes nuclear, it can't be stopped, in fact nuclear rollback has happened before and across a wide variety of regimes. Sometimes it has taken carrots and sometimes it has taken some serious punishment.

Brazil, Argentina, Libya and South Africa, Ukraine and Kazakhstan are countries that willingly or otherwise decided to comply with the demands of the international community as provided by the norms and principles of the Non Proliferation Treaty (NPT) conceived in 1968 and later the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty as well.

Nuclear rollback hinges on several factors, however, and few of them apply to North Korea, a country that has specialized in making a virtue out of its long isolation. Brazil and Argentina could eliminate their nuclear programs at their infancy because their renunciation was bankrolled and supported by the Organization of American States (OAS) in the Treaty of Tlatelolco, also known as the Treaty for the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons in Latin America and the Caribbean ratified in 1967.

Libya also gave up its program in 2004 in order to avoid the stigma of being targeted by the neoconservatives in the Bush Administration. Ukraine and Kazakhstan, in turn, decided not to go nuclear – despite large stockpiles left over in the collapse of the Soviet Union -- because they were persuaded by the Nunn-Lugar program, named for US Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar, which ultimately deactivated more than 6,000 nuclear warheads. Under the program, Ukraine and Kazakhstan received approximately US\$6 billion since the mid-1990s, as well as security reassurances for their safety.

Iraq stopped its nuclear program too, and dramatically, when its nuclear facilities in Osirak were destroyed by Israel air raids in 1981. That destruction has had serious consequences in Iran and North Korea, where both countries have spread their nuclear research and development programs across wide geographical areas and, certainly in North Korea, driven them deep underground into hardened facilities where even some of the best bunker-buster bombs have little hope of uprooting them.

Reversing a country's nuclear program therefore revolves on applying the necessary amount of coercion and incentives. For a while, the United States thought it had found the right balance with North Korea too. In 1994, the Clinton Administration agreed to fund the construction and operation of two light water nuclear reactors in North Korea that would provide for the energy needs of the country.

Japan, South Korea, China and Russia also participated in this initiative under the Korean Energy Development Framework (KEDO). KEDO, however, faced enormous difficulties almost from the start, ostensibly because President Clinton was seen to be "appeasing" a dictator. Thus while it lives, KEDO has not done much.

Even to this day, Senator John McCain, who is the most likely presidential candidate of the Republican Party in 2008, is adamant that the recent nuclear test began because of the Clinton Administration's permissiveness towards North Korea.

Since any deal with North Korea is automatically seen from the prism of appeasement, a word first used to attack British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's concession to Hitler in 1939, it has been difficult for American policymakers to take anything other than a hard line. The result, over the last 10 years, has been the stultification of realistic debate and policy options on North Korea.

Nevertheless, to roll back North Korea's program, especially since Pyongyang has not weaponized the missiles or put them on liquid rocket fuel, a combination of sanction and incentives are needed. Anything less will prove unsuccessful.

Unfortunately, the current international milieu also creates its own complications. The quagmire in Iraq, for instance, has convinced Pyongyang that the US and its allies are not ready for the outright use of force. Nor is South Korea capable of launching an effective military campaign alone.

Pound for pound, the conventional military abilities of South Korea may perhaps be superior by a ratio of 2 to 1. Yet to launch an effective land, aerial and sea campaign, according to Michael O Hanlon at the Brookings Institution in the US, a ratio of 3 to 1 is invariably needed.

Similarly, Japan having just witnessed the appointment of the new Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, is unlikely to use force despite the stiff sanctions it has put in place in the Sea of Japan, blockading North Korean ships.

Although China is not happy with North Korea, Beijing has no reason to invade its own allies. At best, Beijing could instigate a change in the personalities leading the North Korean regime, in order to remove the intransigent Kim Jong-Il. The nuclear test was conducted, and celebrated, as a matter of national pride and prestige. The regime has invested too much of its reputation to be able to perform an about-face.

With less than two years away from the presidential election in US, none of the candidates on either side of the party divides are willing to concede on any point either.

Granted all these factors, which Pyongyang must have certainly taken into account, it is not the least surprising that Pyongyang chose to do what it did on October 9th. Due to the low utility of force and the attendant incentives, the nuclear program in North Korea can only gain in trajectory.

North Korea is now in the best bargaining position in years, certainly stronger than in 1994, when President Clinton and Secretary of Defense William Perry secretly let the North Vietnamese know the isolated country faced invasion unless it accepted the US offer of nuclear reactors for power.

Undeniably, the strengths of North Korea are manifested through its ability to stagger the peace process. North Korea, for instance, can claim that its nuclear program has gone beyond mere experimentation, and has successfully entered possible primary and secondary proliferation internationally. The former involves selling the technology to others, while the latter involves helping countries with dual use technology. And, at the third stage, North Korea could also claim that it already has a proto weaponization program in the works.

Instead of one cluster issue, which is to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear ability, the international community now has to deal with three clusters of issues at once, all of which involve North Korea's ability to trade and engage in the nuclear weapons trade globally, in addition to Pyongyang's own weaponization.

In light of the above, rolling back North Korea is now close to impossible at this stage without regime change to topple the Kim Jong-Il dynasty. The best that the international community can expect is that the worst has not happened. Instead of multiple tests, which would have demonstrated North Korea's intention and capability to weaponize its program, only one small test was conducted.

It is under this scenario that the international community has to negotiate with North Korea, proving once again that the nuclear weapon is indeed the poor country's best friend.

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