Pyongyang's latest nuclear test is another reminder of the seemingly intractable "problem" of North Korea. The country's pursuit of nuclear weapons has apparently been unstoppable. First quietly in the 1980s but lately rather overtly, North Korea has proceeded with its weapons program despite sanctions, isolation, military threats, and attempts at engagement and reconciliation.

At a time when the United States is moving toward normalizing relations with Cuba and extolling "historic progress through diplomacy" with Iran, U.S. relations with North Korea are increasingly anachronistic. But Pyongyang's conventional military capability, its often-convoluted relations with its neighbors and the United States, and the ambiguous examples of other states' paths to developing or abandoning nuclear weapons have made "solving" the North Korean problem a complex challenge indeed.

The North Korean Problem

Aside from a general agreement on the need for multilateral talks and a desire for a nuclear-free Korean Peninsula, there are few other aspects of North Korean policy on which China, Russia, Japan, South Korea and the United States agree. Within each of these countries, there are strongly conflicting opinions regarding any North Korean policy that limits national, much less international, consensus. Even simply defining the North Korean problem is often difficult. Is it about the pursuit and possible proliferation of weapons of mass destruction? About the security of South Korea in the face of the North's conventional threat? Is it Pyongyang's so-called provocative behavior as a disruptor of regional stability? Is it a question of human
rights, global economic access or the legitimacy of the Kim dynasty, or some combination of these issues?

Domestic political considerations as much as international security concerns determine various countries' policies toward Pyongyang. And the North Korean leadership is adept at exploiting these internal and international differences. The result is that despite being tiny, constrained by international sanctions and surrounded by some of the largest military powers in the world, North Korea can still manipulate its neighbors' fears and disagreements to preserve its regime by whatever means it sees as necessary to ensure its survival.

This leaves debate over past and future policies toward North Korea far from resolved. In the United States, equally erudite (and at times equally naive) arguments can be, and often are, made for and against each of the basic policy options for dealing with Pyongyang: engagement, isolation, threat or direct military action.

Sanctions and attempts at international isolation may have slowed North Korea's nuclear and missile development, but they have clearly not stopped these programs. And after several decades, they appear no closer to crippling the North Korean government.

Previous attempts at reconciliation and engagement have had very mixed results. While at times they have slowed North Korea's weapons of mass destruction programs, they have also perhaps granted Pyongyang the space to advance its research and preparations toward a nuclear and missile capability while distracting the world with dialogue.

Threats of military action have done little to dissuade the North's nuclear and conventional weapons development, or its occasional clashes with South Korea. Such threats may have even increased Pyongyang's desire to pursue nuclear weapons - first as something to trade for security assurances, and later as a deterrent themselves.

Calls for military strikes on North Korea to slow or end its nuclear and missile programs have been frequent. But they have just as frequently been dismissed because of the North's proximity to Seoul and even to Japan, questions over the immediate cost versus potential long-term benefit of such actions, and questions over just how China would respond.
No Easy Answers

And so the question continues to arise, what to do about North Korea? There is no easy answer, and certainly none that would satisfy all political factions in the United States, much less in each of the other immediately concerned countries. We are frequently asked what we would recommend. Stratfor traditionally has not made policy prescriptions. This has been to preserve at least some sense of objective observation and to avoid tainting our analysis and forecasts with what we may "want" to see as opposed to how things are actually developing. Moreover, policy prescription can quickly move to advocacy. Though that is a necessary role for many organizations, our role is based on the principle of providing the information necessary to make informed decisions but not asserting which is the "right" decision.

But while we will not argue about the right policy toward North Korea, considering the question does provide a useful moment to seek a better understanding of how policies are chosen. We will primarily look at North Korea from the U.S. perspective, not because this is necessarily the most important lens - though North Korea certainly sees this as a key relationship - but to simplify the topic of North Korean policy.

As much as one would prefer policy options to be simple and clear, the world is, of course, complex. Available policy options are often less the result of a carefully crafted long-term plan for global engagement and more a collection of the least bad of several incomplete and unfulfilling choices. Decisions rarely involve just two options or zero-sum games. They frequently have consequences far beyond the obvious and immediate: Many policy choices often involve finding the path with the fewest immediate negative consequences, even if there are perhaps greater consequences down the road.

One place to begin is to try to understand North Korea's continued demands for a replacement to the 1953 armistice agreement that halted the Korean War. North Korea's regime has a strong interest in holding on to power regardless of whether democratic societies approve. The Northern leadership and country has a fiercely independent streak dating back far earlier than the emergence of the Kim family at the helm of a modern, divided Korea. Diminutive North Korea sits across the border from one of the largest remaining overseas U.S. military deployments and across a fairly narrow body of water from the other. The U.S. military logically carries out regular exercises with South Korea, training in case of another Korean War or in case
a North Korean collapse makes intervention necessary. North Korea logically sees this as threatening, and the U.S. track record of pre-empting military threats furthers this concern.

While formal diplomatic ties or at least the replacement of the armistice with a formal peace accord would not guarantee North Korea's security, either would represent a first step in changing the rationale behind the U.S. deployment and military activity near North Korea. At one time, Pyongyang even would have traded work toward its nuclear weapons for more formal ties and a formal commitment to noninterference and non-hostility. While that is no longer the case, the North may still be willing to slow or at least pause the overt development of its nuclear deterrent. But expecting North Korea to roll back its nuclear and missile programs as a precondition to a formal peace accord fails to understand the North's perception of the existential threat.

**Nuclear Arms and Existential Threats**

Libya serves as a case study for North Korea of why it cannot surrender its nuclear program simply in return for diplomatic ties. In 2003, when Libya opened dialogue with Washington and London to declare an end to its WMD programs, Tripoli was in part responding to concerns of potential U.S. military action against it. At the time, Washington was making the case that an alleged WMD program justified its invasion of Iraq.

Less than a decade later, however, Libyan leader Moammar Gadhafi was overthrown and killed during a social uprising supported by the United States. In Libya, diplomatic relations without a viable deterrent failed to prevent the eventual destabilization of the government. Pyongyang similarly looks to India and Pakistan as examples of countries that have developed an overt nuclear capability with minimal international repercussions.

Replacing the armistice agreement with a formal peace treaty and moving toward the normalization of relations with North Korea would therefore not roll back North Korea's nuclear program or eliminate its missile arsenal. But neither would either of those moves "reward" bad behavior or signal approval of North Korean activities. Instead, a liaison office or formal embassy could shape regular dialogue, create communication mechanisms for resolving misunderstandings, and permit the two sides to gather layers of intelligence and understanding regarding their counterpart.
This is not to say that granting recognition would resolve all problems or lead to an immediate threat reduction, merely that the absence of regular channels for communications does little toward resolving the underlying issues and can cause small issues to swiftly swell to crisis proportions.

**The Value of Direct Channels**

Throughout the Cold War, the United States maintained diplomatic ties with the Soviet Union without condoning Soviet domestic or international policies. Similarly, Washington did not rupture ties with Russia when the latter invaded Georgia and seized Crimea. Moreover, two decades after another northern communist half of a divided country won its struggle with the United States, Washington normalized diplomatic relations with Hanoi despite the continuation of the Communist government and numerous critiques of Vietnam's human rights and economic policies. Before that, President Richard Nixon visited the People's Republic of China in 1972; less than a decade later the United States established formal diplomatic ties with Beijing. And finally, the United States did not formally break ties with India in the 1970s when it tested its first nuclear weapon or break relations with India or Pakistan following their nuclear tests in the late 1990s, though it did impose sanctions.

Although the United States did break diplomatic ties with Iran in 1980 following the occupation of the U.S. Embassy compound, additional sanctions against Iran in the 2000s and changing regional dynamics for both Iran and the United States perhaps played a greater role in the current round of U.S.-Iranian dialogue. Iran's nuclear program is a small component of a much larger Middle East dynamic and of Washington's desire to curtail the extended active deployment of U.S. forces overseas. The nuclear program was a focal point for dialogue, but talks were about much more than whether Iran could reprocess nuclear fuel or develop a bomb.

In general, having regular channels for dialogue provides at least a more ready and reliable method for managing long-term and short disruptions in relations, whereas having no reliable channels leaves things unresolved or at the mercy of the other actors. For this reason, the U.S. military currently promotes greater dialogue with potential opponents over complete isolation. China is the most recent case in point. The U.S. Defense Department pursues regular military exchanges with China's People's Liberation Army, arguing that such exchanges create deeper understanding between the potential adversaries, reducing the potential for conflict and providing
mechanisms to resolve unexpected (and lingering) conflicts. Greater access and dialogue can lead to greater understanding of the motives, pressures and constraints of the counterparts, adding valuable intelligence to the mix in shaping more effective policies.

It would be naive to assume that diplomatic ties or a liaison office would resolve all outstanding issues with North Korea. Certainly, the North would suggest that such steps amounted to a recognition of the North's nuclear status. This raises the question of whether denying that status makes sense. The United States simultaneously claims that North Korea either is developing or already has several nuclear devices (or perhaps even nuclear weapons) and that North Korea is not a nuclear weapons state.

Acknowledging the North

The rhetorical acrobatics in this dual assertion become even more jarring when the United States modifies its own interpretation of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty to engage in civilian nuclear cooperation with India, or continues with defense cooperation with Pakistan. Both India and Pakistan are declared nuclear weapons states outside the NPT but nonetheless enjoy formal diplomatic relations with Washington and serve as close security partners in some ways with the United States.

Despite the two South Asian countries' contentious relationship with one another, there is minimal effort to roll back the Indian or Pakistani nuclear programs, something that would be required by either's decision to sign on to the NPT. Rather, there is a tacit acceptance of the fact that both countries are already nuclear weapons states, something that seems to cause little consternation in Washington, Beijing or elsewhere. Relationships with India and Pakistan are much more complex than the binary question of whether they "legitimately" have nuclear weapons.

This leaves North Korea in a very odd position. Of the three members of the so-called Axis of Evil, it is the outlier, since the Iraqi government was overthrown and the Iranian government is in regular dialogue with Washington. Unlike the other two, Pyongyang has already carried out four nuclear tests and has little interest in ending its efforts until it has demonstrated a viable weapon. It views Libya as the case study for not giving up a weapons program and India and Pakistan, and even Israel, as models for keeping WMD programs while enjoying international acceptance. Neither isolation nor acceptance will alter Pyongyang's perception of its vulnerability without a viable deterrent. But a permanent dialogue mechanism may provide more options
for managing North Korea and its impact on regional security and stability than simply trying to ignore it into submission.

No matter what path it pursues, the United States will endure domestic criticism for being either too weak or too aggressive; by its nature, diplomacy spurs such discussions in a democracy. Even more complicated (and perhaps for expounding another time) are the historical and geopolitical factors that shape relations among South Korea, Japan, China and Russia and each of their respective domestic differences.

There is, in short, no simple answer regarding what to do about North Korea. But engagement that proves more costly for the North to disrupt than to continue may at least place some of the initiative into U.S. hands instead of leaving matters for Pyongyang to shape. At a minimum, a more nuanced and less dogmatic debate in Washington over zero-sum perceptions of engagement versus containment is called for.

Send us your thoughts on this report.

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