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It's too late to stop North Korea as a nuclear state — But here's what we can do

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Beijing — By now, North Korea has successfully conducted its sixth nuclear test — along with a series of intercontinental ballistic missile tests. At this point in time, it is believed to potentially possess the tools to put it in the position of nuclear deterrence — “the theory that Country X won't fire nukes at Country Y if Country Y has nukes it can fire back” — against the United States. As a result, the window of opportunity to roll back North Korean weapons programs has been closed. While the U.S. should perhaps on principle refuse to accept that North Korea is a “legitimate nuclear weapons state,” it can no longer simply ignore the fact that an increasingly influential nuclear power is out there.

The harsh reality is that the U.S. has no other choice but to accept a nuclear North Korea if it wants to achieve long-term peace and stability in the Korean Peninsula. But before it can move on and ease tensions, it must change its mind set by understanding why there is no other option but to let North Korea go nuclear. Here's what America needs to come to terms with.

1. It is now too late to denuclearize North Korea without using force.

Countries that have voluntarily abandoned nuclear weapons — such as South Africa, Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus — likely did so because their security environment improved. North Korea is a completely different case. It has developed nuclear weapons in part to deter U.S. aggression. The deployment of U.S. troops and weapons in South Korea and Japan, the regularly held military exercises near the Korean Peninsula and the generally unrivaled power of the U.S. military, have made North Korea seemingly paranoid and all the more inclined to seek nuclear weapons for protection. As long as no true reconciliation exists between the United States and North Korea — which seems increasingly unlikely given the harsh rhetoric between both powers of late — the latter will feel threatened. It is thus difficult to imagine that Pyongyang will find it suitable to abandon its nuclear weapons, especially when its security situation is arguably deteriorating as North Korean leader Kim Jong Un engages in a war of words with U.S. President Donald Trump. At this rate, only military strikes can deprive North Korea of nuclear weapons, and even that option is a poor one — such a measure will be costly and almost surely lead to mass casualties.

2. Accepting a nuclear North Korea will not make the world more dangerous.

North Korean leaders are as rational as their counterparts. Arguments that North Korea is not applicable to the “classical deterrence theory” are mainly based on the past aggressive behavior and the authoritarian nature of the regime. However, history has shown that the North Koreans have in fact been good at calculation and restraint when they feel that the regime's survival is at stake. The structure of the regime itself has nothing to do with rationality. The Soviet Union and China were also authoritarian when they strived for nuclear weapons, and both actors were still often seen as rational actors within the nuclear realm. There is little concrete evidence, as top CIA officials have also argued, that Kim Jong Un is a “madman” who will unleash nuclear weapons when regime survival is not doomed.

3. There are no better alternatives at this point.

Even if statements of Kim Jong Un's "irrationality" could be substantiated, the world has run out of options to stop him from going nuclear. Sanctions are futile. After nine rounds of sanctions imposed by the United Nations Security Council, North Korea has not changed course. Even if more strident sanctions are imposed that may threaten the livelihood of the country, the tenacity of the North Korean populace to endure hardships cannot be underestimated. War is highly risky. If there was no way to avoid Seoul being saturated by retaliatory shelling from the other side of the 38th parallel in the past — which would likely occur in the event of such a conflict — there is none even now.

Having understood and digested these points, the U.S. should not take the reality of a nuclear North Korea as a sign of defeat and blindly accept what Pyongyang says just because of its nuclear capabilities. I am not suggesting that nothing can be done but appeasement to North Korea. On the contrary, there is a lot that can be done to solve this crisis and build long-lasting peace in the region and beyond. Here are four steps the U.S. can take to create a more favorable climate in a nuclear North Korea world.

1. The U.S. should reassure its Asian allies that it will stand by them in times of crisis.

For South Korea and Japan, a nuclear North Korea means that the military balance has been broken and that North Korea is benefiting. However, the balance can be restored if the U.S. provides a stronger security guarantee to others at risk in the region. For deterrence to succeed, the U.S. must explicitly warn North Korea that it is ready to protect its allies, even if North Korean missiles with nuclear warheads can reach American soil.

2. The U.S. should assuage North Korea's security concerns.

A lot can be done to reduce tensions. While promising security assurance to its allies, the U.S. can also reduce military activities in the region as a goodwill gesture to North Korea. In particular, the head of state, President Trump, should take the initiative to cease his war of words with Kim Jong Un. It is dangerous to engage in endless name-calling and humiliating exchanges with phrases like "little rocket man" and "mentally deranged U.S. dotard," as fury might drive either of the two leaders to make irrational decisions. Instead of focusing on denuclearization, the U.S. can consider freezing negotiations aimed at weapons programs in North Korea, with sanctions relief contingent on concessions made by Pyongyang — a proposal not unlike what China has made in the past.

3. The U.S. and its allies should get China and Russia on board with North Korea negotiations.

While enhancing defense ties, the U.S., South Korea and Japan must draw lessons from the controversial American missile defense system deployment in South Korea and also consider Chinese and Russian concerns and interests. With mistrust mitigated, the five parties can form a united front and coordinate their positions, like the P5+1 (the permanent five members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany) did in negotiations with Iran.

4. The U.S. should make it clear that it will not allow other powers to go nuclear.

No doubt accepting a nuclear North Korea will deal a heavy blow to an international nonproliferation regime. Some other countries, like Iran and Saudi Arabia, are closely watching to see how far North Korea will go — and they might follow suit. But it is never too late to mend the fence of nonproliferation. The U.S., supported by other countries, should explicitly claim that any future attempt to go nuclear by other countries will be met with grave consequences of coordinated isolation, stringent sanctions and even U.N.-mandated military strikes.

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