

FOREIGN RELATIONS | MARCH 2013

Making the Case: North Korea's Nuclear and Missile Efforts

By Mieke Eoyang and Aki Peritz

The U.S. is currently leading the effort to halt North Korea's nuclear weapons program and protect our allies in the Asia-Pacific region. Here is how to discuss this important issue:

1. North Korea's missile and nuclear programs threaten our interests and our allies. We will defend our friends—and ourselves—starting with our planned deployment of more missile interceptors in Alaska.
2. The U.S. has been making progress toward convincing the international community to crack down on Pyongyang even further.
3. Given the threat, we must maintain a robust military presence in Asia to maintain the peace in the Asia-Pacific region.
4. We must work with China—North Korea's only ally—to achieve a lasting end to Pyongyang's continuing nuclear intransigence.

North Korea continues to defy the U.S. and the world by threatening its neighbors and conducting nuclear weapons and missile tests. The regime conducted an underground nuclear weapon test in February 2013 and launched a satellite in December 2012, further underscoring its increasingly sophisticated weapons capabilities. Furthermore, its young new leader, Kim Jong-Un, is either unwilling or unable to fundamentally alter the political course of his repressive nation.

North Korea's missile and nuclear programs threaten our interests and our allies. We will defend our friends—and ourselves—starting with our planned deployment of more missile interceptors in Alaska.

- North Korea routinely threatens the U.S., South Korea, and Japan with military strikes and occasionally uses violence to garner international attention. In early March, North Korea declared it was scrapping the armistice it has had with South Korea since 1953, suggesting Pyongyang could resume hostilities at any time.

The United States refuses to reward bad North Korean behavior. The United States will not play the game of accepting empty promises or yielding to threats.

— Tom Donilon
National Security Advisor
March 11, 2013

- North Korea has had a secret nuclear weapons program since the 1980s; it successfully tested an atomic device in 2006.¹ Experts estimate North Korea has enough plutonium for at least six nuclear weapons.²
- Pyongyang is now trying to miniaturize its nuclear arsenal to fit into its missiles.³ In December, North Korea launched a satellite into space, an important precursor to developing an intercontinental ballistic missile capability.
- Pyongyang has a long-range missile system that could strike Alaska; in mid-March, Secretary of Defense Hagel announced the Pentagon was deploying more ground-based missile interceptors in Alaska to meet the threat.⁴

The U.S. has been making progress toward convincing the international community to crack down on Pyongyang even further.

In early March, the U.S. and China—through the United Nations—drafted harsh new sanctions that explicitly target North Korea’s nuclear program and personnel. These sanctions are in addition to the U.S. economic embargo on North Korea that dates back to 1950.⁵

- These sanctions take aim at “the illicit activities of North Korean diplomatic personnel, North Korean banking relationships, (and) illicit transfers of bulk cash.”⁶
- Current sanctions allow nations to inspect cargo in transit to North Korea for nuclear or missile-related material. Under these new sanctions, nations must inspect cargo within their borders, with most North Korea-intended cargo transiting through China. These new sanctions will also crack down on luxury goods loved by the North Korean elite.

Given the threat, we must maintain a robust military presence in Asia to maintain the peace in the Asia-Pacific region.

Absent our efforts in the region, rogue actors like North Korea could cause more mischief than they already do. We must continue to work with South Korea and Japan to provide a united front against provocative North Korean behavior.

- America maintains the 7th Fleet—which includes the USS George Washington aircraft carrier, 60-70 ships, and 200-300 aircraft—in the region in case of conflict.⁷

MAKING THE CASE

North Korea is a threat to the U.S. and our allies in the region.

MAKING THE CASE

We are leading the international community’s efforts to crack down on North Korea.

- We garrison 28,500 troops in South Korea, 36,000 in Japan, 4,200 in Guam, and 42,000 in Hawaii.⁸
- We have mutual-defense treaties with Japan and South Korea, and we will come to their aid in the event of an attack.

We must work with China—North Korea’s only ally—to achieve a lasting end to Pyongyang’s continuing nuclear intransigence.

While China has been reluctant to act against its historic Communist ally and neighbor, Beijing’s patience with Pyongyang’s continuing violations of international norms—as well as its defiance of China’s explicit warnings to cease its nuclear tests—may be wearing thin.

- Following North Korea’s latest nuclear weapons test in February 2013, China publicly informed North Korea’s ambassador that Beijing was in “firm opposition” to the test and was upset that Pyongyang went ahead “despite widespread opposition from the international community.”⁹
- A major Chinese Communist Party newspaper editorial written prior to the February nuclear test noted that North Korea “must pay a heavy price” for its “extreme actions.”¹⁰ China’s Communist Party tends to issue its decisions through party-controlled newspaper editorials.
- In the past, China expressed displeasure with North Korea by cutting off Pyongyang’s only oil pipeline. Beijing cut off Pyongyang’s oil in 2003 and 2006, actions which many analysts believe were meant to protest North Korea’s nuclear brinksmanship.¹¹

America and China need to continue to work together to stop North Korea’s nuclear intransigence. America will not be able to stop Pyongyang without Beijing’s help. And while China does not want American troops on its northeastern border in the event of a North Korean government collapse, the specter of a nuclear-armed-but-failed state next door may prove just as unappealing, if not more so, to Beijing.

MAKING THE CASE

In order to keep the peace, America needs a strong military presence in Asia to combat threats like North Korea.

MAKING THE CASE

America and China must work together to lower the temperature on the Korean Peninsula.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mieke Eoyang is the Director of the National Security Program at Third Way and she can be reached at meoyang@thirdway.org. Aki Peritz is a Senior Policy Advisor for National Security at Third Way. He can be reached at aperitz@thirdway.org.

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