

# LETTER TO THE EDITOR

## NORTH KOREA: IS ICBM A THREAT?

**T**he North Korean nuclear program is a horrible example of the results of American leadership failure, deferring action to the next administration.

As to China's role in deferral, it is an open question.

Agreements were signed but were violated immediately, so we seek new agreements. Sanctions are not a policy, just a pretense of policy. All they have accomplished is starvation of millions of North Koreans. China has never enforced sanctions and will never dare to do so. They have not worked elsewhere either, so we seek more sanctions.

Now North Korea claims it has an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM). What to do? The United States has basically one option; China has several options. By stopping all imports and exports through or from its territory, China could collapse the North Korean economy quickly. It could attack the nuclear facilities, also an American option. It could simply invade and occupy the country. It may have means of bringing about a change of regime. Does it really care enough to do anything? Perhaps, to induce regime change, but not to block trade, destroy, or invade after all. North Korea is not threatening to attack China with its ICBM. The United States as far as we know has only considered a military attack on nuclear facilities. Think again.

Chinese culture is horrified at the prospect of uncertainty and chaos. Now, there is no alternative. Its apparent plan to replace Kim Jong-un with a relative ended with the relative's murder in Malaysia. But even a palace coup or massacre was unlikely to go smoothly, nor was there a guarantee that a new ruler would behave as hoped for; South Korea might have its own candidate among the refugees.

The panic reaction to the successful launch of an alleged ICBM is unwarranted. It is irrelevant at this time, perhaps a diversion. North Korea is not going to attack the United States. It is homicidal, but not suicidal. Nor is it going to invade South Korea unless it is convinced that the United States will not retaliate.

The current North Korean strategy is about money to keep its elite happy. It is more afraid of internal unrest than of foreign attack. Counterfeit currency, drugs, and ransom have all been tried. It is a criminal administration. Other nations have better missiles for sale, at low prices. It is exporting labor, possibly draining its armed forces. What else? North Korea has a lot of uranium-238 and plutonium in various

packages—compact, portable, extremely valuable. Does it have a paying customers already? I am sure it is in the market. That is the current threat, and it is insurgent. Destroying missile launching sites will not end it.

The ICBM program is a long-run strategy. The objective is the looting of South Korea by conquest. To achieve this goal it is necessary to prevent intervention by the United States in South Korea's behalf, as it did once before. The thinking is that a threat to destroy Los Angeles will do the job. This strategy is behind schedule and cannot succeed because no president I can think of in the present or future would stand by idly. It is a coercion strategy. However, the strategy could be implemented anyway; North Korea is capable of wishful thinking and risk taking. It will not have a credible capability to attack the continental United States for a number of years, so let us leave this legacy to the future. Meanwhile Kim Jong-un has uranium-238 to sell.

China, South Korea, perhaps other nations might have secret agents in the palace of the Kims. The chaos following a coup is preferable to a military attack on nuclear facilities. A change of regime is also needed to rescue Seoul from its current role as a potential hostage. First conduct a coup, then deal with the nuclear issue while retaining the option of attacking missile sites. And keep in mind that China, not just North Korea, is anxious to have the American military out of South Korea, one way or another.

There is need for Chinese-American cooperation following a regime collapse in North Korea. Humanitarian aid for the people should be relatively easy. Establishing a stable and peaceful regime acceptable to both nations would be more difficult. That job would best done by South Korea. It is no business of America, beyond the nuclear threat. But the imperial ambitions of the Chinese leadership are unpredictable. That is another story.

There is a third Korea which might be a factor in Chinese thinking. It is the millions of ethnic Koreans living close to the Korean Peninsula. What if North Korea were a decent place, or offered easy access to South Korea or the first two Koreas were united? It is one ethnic minority that would have a place to go. Leave that to future generations of Koreans.

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