EMBASSY

North Korea is a proliferation problem, not a defence problem

Effective nuclear non-proliferation is essential to meeting global nuclear disarmament ambitions.

US State Dept Photo

United States Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Col. James Minnich, secretary of the United Nations Command Military Armistice Commission, in the Korean Demilitarized Zone on Oct. 6, 2015.

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The international community will be making a fateful error if it comes to regard North Korea's fledgling nuclear arsenal as a defence problem for which deterrence and missile defence are the solution.

Pyongyang's nuclear activity is a proliferation problem, and the longer it remains unresolved the more intractable the much larger and more urgent global nuclear weapons problems and disarmament challenges become.

Kim Jung Un's call on his military to get ready to launch a pre-emptive attack simply confirms what is already clear—that, left to its own devices, North Korea will continue working to develop warheads and ballistic missiles capable of credibly threatening its neighbours and ultimately North America.

And, to no one's surprise, the primary response of United States politicians has been to hype ballistic missile defence.

Republican Senators Kelly Ayotte, Tom Cotton, and Mike Rogers are among those calling for renewed emphasis on ballistic missile defence, and the leading Democratic presidential contender, Hillary Clinton, has also called for strengthened BMD efforts.

Even William Perry, a former US defence secretary and now a staunch nuclear disarmament advocate, has concluded that containment is for now the best option.

Unfortunately, elements of the Canadian security establishment don't even counsel containment. A 2014 report by the Canadian Senate Standing Committee on National Security and Defence, "Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence: Responding to the evolving threat," gives prominent, and largely appropriate, emphasis to the emerging North Korean nuclear-armed missile threat and Pyongyang's disruptive presence within the North Asia region.

But it then concludes with a single unanimous recommendation: "that the government of Canada enter into an agreement with the United States to participate as a partner in ballistic missile defence."

More recently, a report by the University of Ottawa's Centre for International Policy Studies also called on the new Liberal government to "formally join the United States' ballistic missile defence system"—although, this November 2015 paper on "Canada's International Security and Defence Policy" seems less concerned about a possible rogue nuclear missile threat than about the viability of NORAD.

The report insists that Canada should not only join BMD, but should persuade the Americans to "locate the command and control [of mid-course interception BMD] within NORAD in order to enhance the status of NORAD," and thus try to ensure its future.

But why leave North Korea to its own devices? It is in flagrant violation of its Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty obligations (the fact it has withdrawn from the treaty does not absolve it from the violations committed while still a member) and ignores the firm commitments it made in earlier rounds of the Six-Party talks—namely, to end its nuclear weapons program and to rejoin the NPT.

And therein lies the biggest North Korean threat. It's not a bolt out of the blue pre-emptive nuclear attack from the Hermit Kingdom; it's the threat that the international community will fail to rise to this nuclear non-proliferation challenge but will in effect ignore it, even tolerate it, and rely on ballistic missile defence to counter it.

North Korea is now the only source of the kind of potentially credible ballistic missile threat that BMD is intended to neutralize. The annual financial burden of BMD now runs well into the tens of billions when North American, European NATO, and Russian and Chinese programs are tallied.

But even more concerning is BMD's dangerously destabilizing and counter-productive impact on US and NATO strategic relations with Russia and China. That an unproven technology bearing that level of financial and political cost should be the preferred response to a potential threat from one the world's most isolated and dysfunctional states defies rationality.

The international community has spent half a century developing a more rational defence against so-called rogue nuclear threats—namely, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, the International Atomic Energy Agency as its verification mechanism, the Hague Code of Conduct Against Ballistic Missile Proliferation (HCOC), resolution 1540 on nuclear terrorism, and other such instruments.

The non-proliferation architecture linked to the NPT is a proven mechanism (not a claim to be made for BMD). Of the NPT's 185 non-nuclear-weapon state members, North Korea is the only one that has violated the treaty to the extent of acquiring a nuclear weapon.

Furthermore, it is the treaty's IAEA safeguards arrangements and inspections that are at the core of verifying that Iran does not now, and will not in the foreseeable future, constitute a nuclear threat.

The NPT has obviously been less effective as a disarmament treaty (and nuclear weapon state parties to the treaty join North Korea as violators of their treaty obligations), but a failure to deal effectively with North Korea will only make disarmament even harder to achieve.

Effective nuclear non-proliferation is essential to meeting global nuclear disarmament ambitions, and if non-proliferation fails, so too does disarmament.

Of course, it is equally true that nuclear disarmament by states now in possession of nuclear weapons is also essential for long-term non-proliferation. If disarmament fails, so too will non-proliferation, because the world is long past the point of indefinitely tolerating a world divided into nuclear haves and have-nots.

If the international community acquiesces indefinitely to a nuclear armed North Korea by treating it as a defence problem rather than a proliferation challenge, it will produce a shattering loss of confidence in the global nonproliferation system. If the nonproliferation system cannot effectively deal with a state as poor, dysfunctional, and marginalized as North Korea, who will be prepared to trust it?

Most analysts see little chance for short-term progress toward North Korean disarmament, but longer-term strategies to prevent expansion of its still limited arsenal and to keep it from transferring nuclear technologies to others (including non-state groups) are feasible.

And those strategies can in turn shift the focus back in line with the security council's unanimous decision under the UN's Chapter VII enforcement mandate—namely, that North Korea "shall abandon all nuclear weapons and existing nuclear programs in a complete, verifiable and irreversible manner, and immediately cease all related activities."

Progress requires that the security council's new demands and sanctions win broad international support and for states like Canada to become fully engaged in applying nonproliferation pressures and in disarmament diplomacy.

That's where the energy and ambition of the new government in Ottawa needs to be directed—not in seeking a place of favour within Washington's missile defence fantasies.

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