

Leif-Eric Easley, "Beyond Blame, Cooperate on North Korea," *OhmyNews International*, October 11, 2006, front-page leader.

North Korea's apparent nuclear test represents a failure of diplomacy and has everyone asking what will happen next. It is an understandably emotional time in Seoul. South Koreans are disappointed with Pyongyang and with their own government. Some are resentful of the United States, China and Japan. There is plenty of blame to go around and it is useful to reflect on how we arrived at this point. But what is necessary in terms of action is that the five parties - South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the U.S. - apply unprecedented coordinated pressure on Pyongyang.

First, who is to blame for a nuclear North Korea? U.S. foreign policy is partially responsible. When the Bush administration came into office, it relegated North Korea to the back burner. After September 11, President Bush's "Axis of Evil" speech sent an unintended signal, and the war in Iraq did not help relations with Pyongyang. The U.S. government remained divided between engagers and containers, so U.S. policy showed a bit of both.

But the Bush administration was clear that it was not going to be blackmailed by North Korea. It resolved to apply pressure on Pyongyang, not for regime change but to force the regime to make a strategic decision to give up its nuclear weapons programs and open up to the outside world. The U.S. devised the Six-Party Talks to share responsibility for denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula and to form a de facto coalition against Pyongyang should it fail to meet its international commitments.

Bush advisors strongly suspected that North Korea wanted nukes all along and that Pyongyang was just trying to extract concessions on the way to becoming a nuclear power. Those advisors have been proved right, in part because the Washington-led squeeze on Pyongyang engendered more North Korean brinksmanship. Despite signs of a self-fulfilling prophesy, the United States should not bare the brunt of the blame for Pyongyang's nuclear test.

Part of the blame goes to South Korea's failed engagement policy. Engagement to gradually transform the North Korea regime appeared the best course for peace, stability and one day realizing Korean unification. The problem was, President Kim Dae-jung (with ideas of buying a great legacy) went too far, and his successor, President Roh Moo-hyun just continued the policy. Sunshine did not demand adequate reciprocity from Pyongyang, and the reconciliation propaganda of the Kim and Roh administrations did much more to change perceptions in the South than in the North.

Pyongyang took Seoul's cash and refused to reciprocate or open up in ways that would lead to gradual transformation of the North Korean regime. Many in Seoul knew that Sunshine was not working. But it had become a domestic political imperative and a sort of ideology for the inexperienced Uri Party. Meanwhile, Seoul became more

diplomatically dependent on Beijing and damaged its strategic relations with the U.S. and Japan. Engagement was wise and farsighted, but Sunshine failed because of poor implementation, and most of all, because of North Korea's refusal to change.

China and Russia deserve much of the blame for the North Korea situation. They long propped up a distasteful regime that threatens regional security and commits inexplicable human rights violations. North Korea is on the wrong side of history and Beijing and Moscow are a big part of that history. But recently, Russia and especially China are playing more responsible and constructive roles. The two are no longer staunch defenders of Pyongyang. Instead, they have much greater interests in stability and good relations with South Korea, Japan and the United States.

The great majority of blame for the current situation goes to Pyongyang. The North Korean regime has decided to maintain its grip on power at any cost, even if this means greater suffering in the country and further isolation from the international community. Rather than pursue Chinese-style economic reforms, rather than abandon the myth of U.S. intentions to invade, and rather than accept South Korea's significant good will, the North Korean regime has decided to make the country into a nuclear fortress, holding 23 million people in its dungeon.

All this may seem like reason for despair. Years of negotiation and nonproliferation efforts by numerous countries and international bodies have failed. Over 50 years of stalemate since the Korean War has led to North Korea becoming a nuclear power. Is all lost on the Korean Peninsula?

To the contrary, the fact is South Korea has already won. That is why North Korea is throwing tantrums. South Korea went the way of capitalism, democracy and globalization and today is a glaring success story in comparison to the complete failure of North Korea. Indeed, North Korea made its recent provocation just as South Korea's foreign minister wrapped up his bid to become the next Secretary General of the United Nations.

Now that North Korea is a nuclear power (albeit a technologically crude one) what can it do? Pyongyang is running out of cards. It knows if it tries to export nuclear technology or material, or use nuclear weapons against anyone, it will seal its own end. It can try to blackmail the world, but the international community should not allow this. The United Nations Security Council should impose strict sanctions against North Korea, short of causing rapid regime collapse. North Korea needs to be gradually squeezed until a creative package is possible which allows Pyongyang to surrender with some sense of honor. This probably will not happen until there are new faces in all our capitals. Until then, North Korea can be deterred, and while increasing pressure on the regime, the international community can drop hints of security reassurances and economic opportunities.

The North Korean regime has already lost, but the situation is still dangerous. Now is not the time to point fingers or practice pessimism. What is necessary is that the

UN Security Council provide a clear mandate for greater pressure on North Korea, and that the five parties - South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the United States - get onto the same page and stay there. This is possible if Beijing proves responsible, Seoul committed, and the U.S. and Japan relatively restrained.

As the North Korean regime faces a world united against it, Pyongyang will find ways to change. After making it clear to North Korea that it can no longer divide and exploit its neighbors, the five parties can reintroduce incentives "commitment for commitment, action for action." This phased re-engagement will be essential because regardless of shares of blame, or differences in national interests and strategy, no one wants to pay for a loose nukes failed state.

Leif-Eric Easley is a Ph.D. candidate in Government and International Relations at Harvard University and a member of the Pacific Forum CSIS Young Leaders Program.