

## Why no one takes responsibility

Over-estimating Beijing's role and influence over the North has made things worse.  
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South Korea and the international community have acted decisively to punish North Korea for its fourth nuclear test on Jan. 6, which Pyongyang claimed was a powerful hydrogen bomb.

The United States flew a B-52 bomber jet from its air base in Guam to South Korea, and the Korean and U.S. defense authorities are mulling the deployment of other "strategic assets," like nuclear-powered submarines and carriers, during joint military exercises.

South Korea resumed its propaganda broadcasts along the border. Washington and Seoul also plan to adopt a so-called 4D Operational Concept, preemptive strikes designed to detect, disrupt, destroy and defend against missile, nuclear, chemical and biological threats from North Korea, during their next military drills.

The U.S. Congress is preparing a stronger set of sanctions against North Korea. These measures are necessary, but somehow everything seems all too familiar. The same scene has played out ever since Pyongyang detonated its first nuclear device in October 2006.

But what have we today?

Powerful countries like the United States, China and South Korea can't even deal with a single isolated country. Looking back on the trajectory of the past two decades, the U.S. policy on North Korea was utterly unsuccessful, and yet we followed it blindly.

The biggest blunder lies in our lack of intelligence. Worse than failing to detect the signs of another nuclear test, our allies did not possess up-to-date information concerning North Korea's advancements in weapons technology, the strategic intentions of the regime's leaders or their political ambitions.

Authorities and experts underestimated the country's nuclear capacity and the

resources it had to maintain its nuclear campaign alongside economic development. It was simply naive and wishful thinking that the regime would inevitably collapse.

Then there was the “all-or-nothing” principle in dialogues with Pyongyang. Seoul and Washington have maintained that there be “complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement” of nuclear activity in North Korea for any significant improvement in aid or ties to occur. Few argue that this should be the ultimate goal.

But it should not serve as a universal guideline in all talks. We first need to access the nuclear facilities in North Korea to discuss what needs to be eliminated and then work toward complete dismantlement to establish a lasting peace framework on the Korean Peninsula to make North Korea an accepted member of the international community.

We should heed what Pyongyang proposed on Jan. 9, 2015, when it said it was willing to cease nuclear tests, and even any activity in nuclear materials, if Washington halted joint military exercises with Seoul. But the U.S. Department of Defense flatly ignored that proposal. Washington claimed Pyongyang had no right to bargain when it failed to honor past agreements. Given North Korea’s track record, the U.S. position is understandable.

President Barack Obama has been referred to as a realist in foreign policy, applying soft power and rapprochement toward its enemy states, though North Korea is strangely an exception.

Overestimating Beijing’s role and influence over the North has also made things worse. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying snorted at Washington’s indication that Beijing was to blame for failing to take Pyongyang to task.

“The key to solving the [North Korean nuclear] problem is not China,” she said, hinting it was Washington that had aggravated the situation with its isolationist policy.

A few hawkish officials in Beijing believe Washington was intentionally neglecting the North Korean nuclear issue to rein in China’s influence on the global stage. That’s why we can’t expect strong and proactive engagement from Beijing in containing North Korea’s nuclear campaign.

There is one way out of this multiple conundrum. We must shake ourselves from the

complacency we built toward the North Korean nuclear program over the decades. North Korea has long been trained and has become accustomed to hardship in return for its nuclear assets, and it will likely stand firm in the face of outside pressure and sanctions.

However, it won't dare use it. A nuclear provocation will inevitably be apocalyptic for both Koreas. Leaving the option open for dialogue and negotiation, with some pressure, will be the only realistic solution. We must accept North Korea's realities and try to steer it toward an incremental and practical denuclearization process with the help of China and Russia. Time is not on our side. Our leadership must come up with an entirely new approach toward North Korea.

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