North Korea’s nuclear test on Feb. 12 — following earlier tests in 2006 and 2009 — set off a predictable cascade of international criticism and calls for stiffer sanctions, especially from hardliners in Washington. But what the US should be doing is seeking, in partnership with South Korea and Japan, to engage North Korea diplomatically and also reassure China about its intentions on the Peninsula, argues Leon V. Sigal.

The rumble of ritual condemnation fast muffled the earthquake set off by North Korea’s third nuclear test. Its latest attempt to perfect a more compact weapons design demonstrated that Pyongyang has been edging ever closer to equipping itself with dozens of nuclear warheads capable of being delivered by missiles. Such an unbounded nuclear weapons program in the hands of a serial disturber of the peace is destined to shake the security of Northeast Asia to its foundations.

Washington has rightly been moving to reassure allies South Korea and Japan by strengthening deterrence. Not reaching out to reassure China at the same time, however, risks intensifying suspicions in Beijing and putting allied security in greater jeopardy.

Washington is focused on further isolating Pyongyang, as if imposing tighter sanctions could somehow reverse its drive to arm despite the failure of Washington’s decades-long economic embargo. Calls for China to rid us of this turbulent regime resound in the halls of Congress and the news media — as if Beijing’s influence could somehow rescue the US from its own failed North Korea policy.

Yet Beijing’s interest in sustaining Pyongyang cannot somehow be wished away. It is utterly unrealistic to expect China to abandon North Korea as the US moves to bolster its alliances with South Korea and Japan.

Aggravating the regional security environment, ultranationalists in Japan who want to confront China and expose US unreliability will seize on North Korea’s nuclear advances to impose their own assertive foreign policy and nuclear agenda on Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. And South Korean President Park Geun-hye will face pressure from the right wing of her party to shy away from deeper engagement with North Korea, even though it is in South Korea’s interest to nurture much-needed change in North Korea and to counter rising Chinese economic influence there.

Three changes in policy direction are needed to head off this impending regional instability: first, US political and diplomatic rebalancing with China to accompany its military rebalancing to Asia; second, deeper South Korean economic engagement; and third, exploration of a peace process on the Korean peninsula which Pyongyang says it wants, linked to negotiations to limit its nuclear and missile programs.

Reassuring US Allies — and China

US steps to bolster allied deterrence will include dispatching aircraft carriers, nuclear-powered submarines or B-52 bombers to the region for joint exercises, expanding missile defenses, and helping South Korea develop longer-range ballistic missiles to add to the long-range cruise missiles it recently deployed. Yet doing so without reaching out to reassure China at the same time will hardly encourage Chinese co-operation on North Korea — or anywhere else.

No chorus of disclaimers from Washington will

Of course we want peace. A picture released by North Korean Central News Agency in March 2012 during North Korean military exercises. Reprinted with anger expressed from Pyongyang about exercises being jointly conducted by US and South Korean troops.
persuade Beijing that the US pivot to Asia is not aimed at containing it. Why would China push for collapse in North Korea when it sees the US and Japan moving to contain it?

China may withhold enough from North Korea to demonstrate its displeasure with the nuclear test, but no more. Instead of calling on Beijing to cut off aid and investment, Washington would be better off urging it to do more to bar suspect overflights and beef up customs inspections in ports such as Dalian in order to curtail North Korean exports and imports of nuclear and missile technology and know-how, as well as tighten banking regulation of the financial underpinnings of that trade.

Some in Washington and Tokyo are seizing on Beijing’s unwillingness to bring North Korea to its knees as evidence of Chinese hostility — grounds for accelerating military containment. Yet antagonizing China will deepen insecurity in Northeast Asia, not put more pressure on Pyongyang. To avoid such a result, Washington needs to seek a modus vivendi with China and encourage its allies to do the same. Co-operation has to be a two-way street.

A sustained effort at rapprochement is essential. That could include bilateral discussion of security issues, for instance, exploring a buffer zone along China’s coast in return for China’s acceptance of a comparable buffer zone in the waters off Japan, greater US restraint in arming Taiwan in return for greater Chinese transparency about its military plans and programs, and tension-easing in the South China Sea.

Revived accommodation would also involve sustained military-to-military consultations to address their mutual vulnerability in the domains of space (anti-satellite weapons), cyberspace and nuclear weaponry through mutual restraint. That might include acknowledgement of mutual deterrence (US acceptance of China’s retaliatory capability as legitimate) and a pledge of no first use of nuclear weapons against each other, a ban on attacks or interference with one another’s satellites, and a pledge of no cyber attacks on each other’s critical infrastructure.2

US rapprochement will benefit South Korea, which does not want to be entrapped in a renewed cold war between the US and China. It could also counter the rising ultranationalist tide in Japan. Rightists such as Shintaro Ishihara, longtime proponent of “a Japan that can say no” to the US, exploited a wedge issue with the US and stoked confrontation with China last year by offering to buy the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands. Ishihara resigned as governor of Tokyo to found his own Rise-up Japan Party, which merged with another right-wing party and captured 57 seats in the 480-member Lower House of the Diet in the December 2012 election. Ishihara also has upwards of 100 sympathizers in the ruling Liberal Democratic Party who were swept into office by its landslide. Yet realists in Japan’s security circles still support the US alliance and accommodation with China. So do most Japanese and the business community, which depends on China trade.

*Strategic Patience* Fails

US President Barack Obama’s administration also needs a new approach to North Korea. His first administration came to power in 2009 with “strategic patience” as its watchword, but a watchword is not a policy. Without a policy of its own, it conceded the initiative to Tokyo, Seoul and Pyongyang, which were all spoiling for a fight. The result has been a reversal of inter-Korean reconciliation, the breakdown of Six-Party talks, three satellite launches, two nuclear tests, and three deadly clashes in the West Sea.

The extent to which North Korea could have been dissuaded from arming by sustained US diplomacy will continue to be debated, but this much is incontestable. In the 1990s, the only way that North Korea could generate the explosive ingredient for nuclear weapons was to remove spent fuel from its Yongbyon reactor and reprocess it to extract plutonium. Yet it stopped reprocessing in late 1991 and did not resume until 2003, denying itself dozens of bombs’ worth of plutonium. It shut down its reactor at Yongbyon from 1994 to 2003 under the 1994 Agreed Framework and again in 2007 under an October 2007 Six-Party accord, since when it has remained shut. Moreover, Pyongyang has conducted very few test launches of medium- and long-range ballistic missiles over the past two decades. As a consequence, it still has just a handful of nuclear devices and no reliable missiles to deliver them.

Unfortunately, the administration of former President Bill Clinton was slow to live up to the Agreed Framework and the George W. Bush administration scrapped it altogether, seizing on evidence that North Korea was seeking the means to enrich uranium. Yet when North Korea offered to negotiate on enrichment in October 2002, US envoy James Kelly’s instructions barred him from doing so. As former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice attests in her memoir, “Because his instructions were so constraining, Jim couldn’t fully explore what might have been an opening to put the program on the table.”3

Rice eventually persuaded Bush to try negotiating for a change in 2005, only to have Japan and South Korea undo the October 2007 agreement in 2008 by reneging on promised energy aid. Rice is diplomatic in describing Tokyo’s penurious role: “It began to feel as if the Japanese wanted the Six-Party talks to fail lest they lose their leverage with us to help them with the admittedly tragic abduction issue.”4

When the Obama administration took over, it was in no mood to negotiate. Instead, it sustained the reneging on aid and embraced “strategic patience.” As Jeffrey Bader, senior director for Asian affairs on Obama’s National Security Council staff, writes, “We needed a policy that would force North Korea to reassess the value of its program and therefore maximize the chance of pursuing denuclearization seriously.”5 Bader, who accompanied Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton on her first trip to Asia, reports that President Lee Myung-bak told them that Pyongyang would become more pliable “if the international community, especially South Korea and the United States, showed firmness and did not repeat previous acceptance of North Korean extortions.”6

Now, strategic patience is widely judged a failure in Washington. So are disengagement and pressure in Seoul. Doing more of the same makes no sense. Tighter sanctions won’t accomplish much. Under sanctions North Korea’s legitimate trade has grown substantially — and not just with China. Sanctions have done little to date to keep North Korea from improving its nuclear arms and missiles or exporting its technology and know-how.
More effective curbs on proliferation are unlikely without negotiated limits on North Korean weapons programs. The more weapons they make, the more they have to sell.

**Needed: A New North Korea Policy**

Instead, Washington and Seoul need to address the underlying causes of Pyongyang’s insecurity. The starting point is economic engagement. Next, seek a peace process to ease tensions on the peninsula. Third, eventually reopen negotiations between Washington and Pyongyang.

President Park is right to revive political and economic engagement with North Korea. The emphasis should be on training and working with North Koreans, not just funding projects in the North. Investment and aid, no doubt, will bolster the regime by spurring economic growth in the near term, but over time it can gradually transform North Korea from within.

Pyongyang says it wants a peace process on the Korean peninsula. Probing that is in South Korean and US interests, especially now that North Korea is nuclear-armed. Deterrence alone will not assure peace on the peninsula, as was shown by the sinking of the naval corvette Cheonan in March 2010 in retaliation for the November 2009 shooting up of a North Korean naval vessel and a November 2010 artillery exchange on Yeonpyeong Island.7

To condemn these North Korean provocations is to ignore the precarious military balance in Korea and the parlous political context on the peninsula. North Korea’s armed forces are inferior to South Korea’s on land, in the air and at sea. For its part, Pyongyang can credibly threaten devastation of much of Seoul within range of its artillery and short-range missiles, which should suffice to deter an attack by South Korea even without the use of nuclear weapons. In short, mutual deterrence makes the likelihood of deliberate aggression on the peninsula quite low. Yet, as is evident from the recent West Sea incident, the very steps each side takes to deter premeditated war increase the risk of deadly clashes, if not inadvertent war.

To head off future incidents, peace talks are needed. That is best explored at the start in the context of North-South engagement. A peace process involving the two Koreas and the US, and perhaps China, could open the way to US-North Korea nuclear and missile talks.

Pyongyang has ruled out complete denuclearization, but it may have left open the possibility of limiting its nuclear weapons and missile programs, perhaps by reviving its Leap Day pledge to suspend enrichment at Yongbyon verifiably and stop nuclear and missile testing, though not satellite launches.

Such an arrangement would benefit US and allied security. As of now, North Korea is continuing to enrich uranium. It is constructing a new light-water reactor to generate power, which (like all power plants) also will create plutonium as a by-product of fission. Despite its successful satellite launch, it has yet to perfect the third stage of a missile robust enough to deliver a warhead at intercontinental range. It can soon test two other longer-range missiles it has shown in parades.

Despite all the talk of strengthening deterrence and tightening sanctions, the only way to curb a growing North Korean nuclear and missile threat and head off a looming security nightmare in Asia is to try to move toward peace in Korea and rapprochement with China. Sustained engagement and negotiation may not work, but unlike disengagement, isolation and rebalancing, they at least have a chance.


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7 For a detailed analysis of the West Sea incidents, see Leon V. Sigal, “Using the Carrot in Korea,” The National Interest, August 18, 2011.