

Policy Forum 06-85: Dr. Strangelove in Pyongyang

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Dr. Strangelove in Pyongyang

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Essay by Peter Hayes and Tim Savage

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I. Introduction

Peter Hayes, Nautilus Institute Executive Director, and Tim Savage, Nautilus Institute Senior Associate, write, "The United States and China should also avoid falling into the 'blame game' about who failed to prevent North Korea from testing. The Six Party Talks are now dead. As the two great powers involved directly with the North, they have to work together to develop a viable strategy to engage North Korea and restart negotiations, possibly in a new tripartite forum. If the United States baulks at engaging North Korea, then China and Russia will simply cut their own deals with Kim Jong Il in order to re-stabilize the situation."

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II. Essay by Peter Hayes and Tim Savage

- Dr. Strangelove in Pyongyang
by Peter Hayes and Tim Savage

Stanley Kubrick's 1964 film about nuclear war, "Dr. Strangelove," was subtitled, "How I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb."

Like Strangelove, North Korea's Kim Jong-il wants his neighbors to love North Korea's bomb. In announcing the test, the (North) Korean Central News Agency argued, "It will contribute to defending the peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and the surrounding areas."

His neighbors, however, do not see it that way. South Korea, Japan, and even China have condemned the nuclear test. All three countries, after all, are within range of North Korea's missiles. The United States says that the world cannot live with a nuclear North Korea.

Few people know that Kim was first a filmmaker, only later, a leader of a nuclear weapons state. Chapter 7 of his turgid text on moviemaking reads: "The Art of Directing Cinema Lies with the Director." This may be a bad movie, but there's no doubt that Kim is choreographing this drama.

The demonic genius of the nuclear Doomsday Machine is that it gives your opponent a stake in your survival. As unpalatable as the world may find Kim Jong-il with nuclear weapons, the alternatives are worse. Regime collapse, the long-cherished dream of the hardliners in Washington and Tokyo, poses the prospect of loose nukes ending up in the hands of power-mad generals in the midst of a war in Korea, or being spirited out of the country to find their way into the hands of terrorists.

South Korea, China and Russia all understand this, which is why they won't go along with any U.S. plans to bring Pyongyang to its knees through financial pressure. Both may retreat from engagement in the short-term, but they will re-engage North Korea in short order.

So how to respond to the nuclear test? Right now, the best response is to do little and say nothing, in order to devalue the Kim's bomb. Confrontational actions such as a naval blockade or other military measures under Chapter 7 UN Security Council sanctions would only validate North Korea's claim that it needed a nuclear force to defend itself from the "hostile policy" of the United States.

Moreover, the situation is too dangerous to risk precipitate military action. Almost nothing is known about North Korea's nuclear weapons, including what command and control systems are in place, how they are safeguarded (if at all), and what kind of prospective deployment and operational doctrine will govern their use. No-one needs North Korea to be improvising its nuclear strategy in the midst of a crisis on the Demilitarized Zone where only last week, bullets were fired in anger.

The United States and China should also avoid falling into the "blame game" about who failed to prevent North Korea from testing. The Six Party Talks are now dead. As the two great powers involved directly with the North, they have to work together to develop a viable strategy to engage North Korea and restart negotiations, possibly in a new tripartite forum. If the United States balks at engaging North Korea, then China and Russia will simply cut their own deals with Kim Jong Il in order to re-stabilize the situation.

Finally, the United States should work to prevent its allies, Japan and South Korea, from building

their own nuclear weapons in response. The mere existence of American nuclear weapons is a powerful deterrent to first-use by Pyongyang. Redeploying American nuclear weapons in Japan, South Korea, or the surface waters of the western Pacific would add no strategic advantage to America's retaliatory capability.

Japan is the linchpin in this regard. The United States must do everything possible to avoid any prospect of Japanese proliferation outcome that would inflame China and both Koreas alike. Issuing ultimatums or new nuclear threats to Pyongyang invites Kim to turn up the volume and conduct a second test and will not lead to anywhere but confrontation.

While everyone figures out how to respond to Strangelove's latest appearance, this time in Pyongyang, they should recall the U.S. president's admonition from the film:

"Gentlemen, there's no fighting in the war room!"

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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