

North Korea Is King of the Rogues

The prospect of all-out conflict between the U.S. and the North Korean regime has loomed large over the last fortnight, as a consequence of the latest round of provocations from Pyongyang.

It's always a competition between the world's rogue states as to which one can pose the greatest threat to global peace and order at any given moment. Since 2011, the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, backed by Russian and Iranian military power in the air and on the ground, has wreaked havoc in the Middle East, annihilating around 500,000 people and transforming millions more into an endless column of refugees streaming across the country's borders. Iran, Assad's lifeline, is itself is a persistent and urgent threat, temporarily held in check by the flimsy nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama administration, which at its most generous interpretation allows the conditions for Tehran to weaponize its nuclear program within a decade.

But it is outside the Middle East, on the Korean peninsula, that the most present threat to the U.S. and its regional allies manifests. How we deal now with an angry, nuclear-enabled North Korean regime, and whether we can avoid a perilous confrontation with it, will be decisive when it comes to facing similar flashes of belligerence from Tehran or Damascus.

It was the assassination of Kim Jong Nam, the half-brother of Kim Jong Un, at Kuala Lumpur Airport Feb. 13 that set off this new series of tensions with North Korea. The manner of the elder Kim's death—sprayed with a VX nerve agent by two women who appear to have been unwittingly recruited by North Korean agents—was an act of pure terrorism, and one more piece of

evidence that North Korea's current dictator, like his father and grandfather before him, has only contempt for the sovereignty of foreign countries. Nothing has changed on that score: The North Korea that carried out kidnappings in Japan in the 1970s is the same North Korea carrying out assassinations in Malaysia decades later.

The grisly murder in Kuala Lumpur was quickly followed by the launch of four ballistic missiles, three of which landed in Japan's exclusive economic area 200 miles from its coastline. Fifty-four thousand American troops remain stationed in Japan—one of several reasons why Kim is aggressively baiting his neighbor across the sea.

As the crisis has escalated, China, which supposedly wields the greatest outside influence on the North Koreans, has been powerless to rein in Kim Jong Un. Beijing's proposal that North Korea end its missile tests in exchange for the cancellation of joint American-South Korean military exercises fell flat, with U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley subsequently announcing that "all options are on the table"—a phrase that is familiar from the Iranian context—in dealing with "the unbelievable, irresponsible arrogance" of the Kim family dynasty's current figurehead.

At times like these, we should be under no illusions about the character of the enemy. North Korea's rulers, in that regard, are first of all an abomination, both in the manner in which they treat their own people and in the mortal danger they pose to outsiders. We are duty-bound to do everything in our power to bring down the Kim dynasty, and we should apologize to nobody for declaring this our ambition.

The best visual illustration of the nature of Kim's regime can be found in a satellite image of the Korean peninsula at night. South Korea sparkles brightly, while North Korea is shrouded in pitch-black darkness—save for a small glimmer around Pyongyang, the capital, where the officials of the

ruling party are quartered, and which is spared, relatively speaking, from the famine and electricity shortages that prevail in the rest of the country.

To look upon that image is to be reminded that North Korea isn't a normal country so much as it is a concentration camp with a seat at the U.N. Indeed, large tracts of the country to the north of Pyongyang are given over to North Korea's very own *gulag* system—penal colonies where up to 150,000 people are incarcerated, and are subjected to forced labor, starvation rations, harsh beatings, rape, torture, exposure to extreme weather, disease and repulsive acts of sadism by guards who could just as easily have served in the death camps of the Nazis.

As is always the case with totalitarian states, there is a ruling ideology that glorifies the fusion of war communism and medieval blood lust that North Korea represents. In Iran, they call it *velayat-e faqih*—the concept that only Islamic jurists can legitimately rule on Earth. In North Korea, the total concentration of power in the Kim dynasty is expressed in the doctrines of *juche*, meaning self-reliance, and *songun*, putting the military first in terms of resource allocation and placing the armed forces at the heart of the state. These dogmas celebrate cruelty and ideological fanaticism. By the same token, they scorn those very things—like family ties, friendship and independent thought—that give value to the lives of Westerners. In North Korea, fear dressed as ideology penetrates so deeply that parents cannot trust their own children, while children know that the state can seize them from their parents at any time, for any reason.

There are other features that North Korea shares with similarly blood-drenched regimes. For all its talk of socialism, North Korea functions like an unopposed hereditary monarchy, much as Iraq did under Saddam Hussein and as Syria has done under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. Like those countries, North Korea has pursued weapons of mass destruction

on the biological and nuclear fronts—only with the success that eluded Saddam and the Assads, and for which Iran eagerly awaits.

The old policy on North Korea, which involved alternately dangling tempting rewards in front of the Kims and then hitting the regime with tough sanctions, has failed to slow North Korea's military development. The *songun* doctrine suggests that Kim Jong Un's sacred duty now is to accelerate that process even further. As Korea analyst Robert E. McCoy explains, "The ultimate goal remains one Korea ruled by the Kim Dynasty. What remains unknown is how and when Kim Jong Un would attempt to achieve that."

The answer may lie in the speed with which Kim develops intercontinental ballistic missiles that can carry nuclear warheads toward Hawaii or the U.S. mainland. When and how we prevent him from reaching that point could turn out to be the most fateful foreign policy decision since October 1962, when U.S. aerial photographs revealed the deployment of Soviet missiles in Cuba. And nobody will be cheering on the North Koreans more than Iran. {eo}

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