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After the Bomb: North Korea Isn't Our Problem

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The U.S., overstretched already, should treat Kim Jong Il as a regional crisis and let China take the lead.

By Anatol Lieven and John Hulsman

The United States is bogged down in what appears to be an unwinnable war in Iraq; it is facing very unpleasant options in regard to neighboring Iran's nuclear program; senior NATO officers say that the situation in Afghanistan is deteriorating fast; in the former Soviet Union, Georgia and Russia are moving toward military confrontation, with the U.S. seemingly unable to restrain either; in large swaths of Latin America, new nationalist and populist movements are challenging U.S. interests.

And now the totalitarian regime in North Korea has defied the international community by testing a nuclear bomb — and the U.S. appears to have neither military nor effective economic measures with which to respond.

If all this does not prove the reality of American overreach, what does? If U.S. power is to be placed on a firmer basis, its exercise must be more limited. Certain commitments will have to be scaled back or even eliminated if the U.S. is to be able to concentrate on dealing with its most truly vital challenges and enemies.

This is not an argument for isolationism but for the kind of calm, clearheaded global strategy adopted in the past by American leaders such as Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon: a morally courageous willingness to recognize the greatest threats to the U.S. and to deal with secondary concerns accordingly. When Roosevelt formed an alliance with the Soviet Union against Hitler, or Nixon went to China to do a deal with Chairman Mao, it was assuredly not because they admired the Stalinist or Maoist systems or were prepared to sacrifice vital U.S. interests to them.

Charles de Gaulle defined the nature of statesmanship when he said that "to govern is to choose — usually between unpleasant alternatives." This is something that the U.S. is finding it increasingly difficult to do. For it is torn among a multitude of different domestic lobbies and presided over by an administration that has grossly overestimated U.S. power.

In consequence, it has involved itself in fights in several different parts of the world simultaneously, sometimes over trivial issues.

Consider, for example, that at a time when the U.S. is facing crises of truly vital importance in the Middle East, it is also drifting toward a dangerous confrontation with Russia, a key player in the Middle East, over ... South Ossetia.

What next, we wonder? Massive U.S. involvement in a Chilean-Argentine conflict over control of the Beagle Channel? A huge commitment of U.S. energy and resources to help Paraguay recover the Gran Chaco?

There is one region that the U.S. can and should bow out of now: Korea. North Korea's bomb test is obviously a very serious problem for the U.S., given its heavy military presence

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in South Korea. However, we should ask why, more than 50 years after the Korean War and 15 years after the end of the Cold War, the United States still has about 37,500 troops on the Korean peninsula.

In the long run, North Korea's nuclear weapons are an overwhelming problem only for its neighbors, and it should be their responsibility to sort this problem out. Of course, they may fail — but then, the U.S. record in the region over the last decade has not exactly been one of success.

The U.S. is already reducing its troop levels on the Korean peninsula; it should accelerate the process and move rapidly toward ending its military presence. Moreover, it should negotiate a peace treaty with North Korea. This will remove Pyongyang's motive to attack U.S. interests, ensure that China could never again attack U.S. forces in a ground war and allow the U.S. to concentrate instead on maintaining its overwhelming lead over China in naval and air power.

We must be very clear, however, that this withdrawal would also mean ceding to China the dominant role in containing North Korea's nuclear ambitions — along with Japan, South Korea and Russia — and in managing the eventual collapse of the North Korean state and the appallingly difficult and expensive process of the reunification of the two Koreas.

Given how costly and difficult reunification has proved to be for the Germanys after the fall of the Berlin Wall, we should be only too happy to throw this particular time bomb into China's lap. It would grant Beijing international prestige and an extra share of regional influence in an area vital to its interests, while saving us great costs and dangers.

North Korea must be treated as a regional problem to be managed by a regional concert of powers, with China in the lead. The U.S. role in all this should be sympathetic — and distant.

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