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Limits of Coercive Isolation: Rethink Strategy on North Korea and Iran

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Synopsis

Coercive diplomacy has failed to compel North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons programme and failed to deter Iran advancing its own. Isolating these two target states further will not succeed because isolation increases their incentives to rely on nuclear deterrence for national security.

Commentary

THE UNITED States and its allies confront today two major regional proliferation challenges. In Northeast Asia, North Korea is pushing its de facto nuclear power status, expanding its production facilities and testing ballistic delivery systems. In the Middle East, Iran continues to approach the nuclear weapons threshold, driving up the risks of a preventive war or destabilising arms race.

In both cases the US has leaned heavily on coercive diplomacy to support its policy objectives - to compel Pyongyang to dismantle its nuclear weapons and to deter Tehran from advancing further toward them. But the US has so far failed in the first instance and had intermittent success at best in the second.

Sources of failure

It is important to understand the sources of this failure, for the prospects of present efforts to halt Iran's nuclear programme and to scale-back North Korea's may be shaped by such insight. Unique circumstances in both situations no doubt play an important role. But the same obstacle appears significant in both cases, and policymakers are likely to identify it as the primary problem: The US and its partners have been unable to effectively isolate the target states.

In the 1990s US efforts to deter North Korea's nuclear programme were undermined by China's refusal to allow its ally to be cornered. After Pyongyang's nuclear test in 2003, attempts by the US and its regional allies to reverse the North's position via the Six Party Talks - involving North Korea, South Korea, Japan, the United States, China, and Russia - have been frustrated for similar reasons.

In the same way, Western attempts to deter Iran's advance to nuclear weapons capability have been blunted by the limits to which Russia and China will allow Tehran to be exposed to multilateral sanctions and UN Security Council enforcement threats.

'Isolate and coerce' strategy misleading

For seasoned leaders and diplomats, common sense dictates that one should try to isolate a country when attempting to coerce it. Isolated adversaries are easier to defeat and negotiate with afterwards, and their lack of allies reduces the blowback of using force against them. These realities make the diplomatic process of isolating an adversary itself a kind of coercion. If coercive diplomacy against North Korea and Iran has fared poorly because they were not effectively isolated then a crucial policy implication follows.

The US and its partners need to make much stronger efforts to induce Pyongyang's and Tehran's major supporters to curtail their patronage. Such inducements will be costly and - inevitably - entail awkward if not painful concessions to Russian and Chinese interests.

But the common sense connection between isolation and coercive success is misleading when it comes to counter-proliferation efforts. That is because when coercive isolation succeeds it intensifies the security motive that drives nuclear proliferation.

Nations deal with security threats through internal and external means. Internally, they mobilise resources to build their own military capabilities. Externally, they cultivate relationships with others that bolster their position. These avenues for building strength are substitutable: governments make counterbalancing adjustments between them. When states relying on others for security lose some of that support, they compensate by increasing their internal efforts (if they cannot find new allies elsewhere).

Coercive isolation no deterrence

That is why coercive isolation of Pyongyang and Tehran - even if the US could achieve it at an acceptable price in concessions to Russia and China - would not likely help to deter or roll back the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programmes. Nuclear weapons are means *par excellence* for states to reduce their dependence on others for support and protection. Increasing their isolation will tend to reinforce their pursuit of security via nuclear weapons. In sum, coercive isolation will fail not because it does not impose high costs but because the kind of costs it imposes increase the value to the target of nuclear weapons.

Consider North Korea. If the goal is to keep its arsenal primitive and small - and perhaps, someday, to dismantle it - it is almost certain that deepening Pyongyang's isolation further will increase the regime's paranoia and determination to develop an unambiguously self-sufficient nuclear deterrent. While it may be advantageous for *other* reasons to promote Chinese distancing from North Korea (such as restraining its provocations towards South Korea and Japan), it is likely that Chinese support for the North, in the form of renewed security assurances, will be a necessary condition for its nuclear renunciation. Only China can offer assurances that have any chance of being perceived to be credible by North Korea.

With Iran the picture is fuzzier because the goal today is to deter weaponisation rather than to compel de-weaponisation. Increasing Iran's isolation by distancing Russia from it - especially in the UN Security Council, where decisions to sanction Iranian non-compliance with IAEA commitments and Council resolutions, are fought out - may have some deterrent effect. It would increase the credibility of threats to launch a preventive war before Iran crosses the nuclear weapons threshold, especially if Russia agreed to support an enforcement resolution that made the threat explicit.

This is an extremely unlikely scenario given today's geopolitical context. But what if it did happen? How would Iran likely respond to the prospect of having all of the permanent members of the Security Council either against it, or willing to abstain on the question of the use of force against it? Isolation will strengthen Tehran's determination to build a bomb.

Increased security guarantees needed

Successful coercive diplomacy to halt or roll back Iranian and North Korean nuclear weapons development will not hinge on further isolation of those regimes. Instead, achieving those goals will require an unusual combination of coercive pressure and increased external assurances and security guarantees that the US - given its strength, recent track-record with Libya, and history of adversarial relations - cannot credibly extend.

Those assurances can only come from China and Russia, and US policy should seek to promote rather than attenuate those relationships as part of its counter-proliferation strategy.

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