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Lessons From a Torpedo

Placating Kim Jong Il doesn't change North Korea's behavior.

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South Korea formally announced Thursday that one of its warships was sunk, and 46 of its sailors murdered, by a North Korean torpedo on March 26. The news itself comes as no surprise. What would be a surprise—a welcome one—is if the U.S. and its allies drew the appropriate conclusions about how to deal with Pyongyang going forward.

North Korea immediately denied any role, but then it always does. South Korea has if anything been exceptionally cautious in reaching its conclusions, inviting experts from the U.S., Australia, the U.K. and Sweden to join its own investigators in assessing the underwater explosion that split the Cheonan and caused it to sink. Pieces of the recovered torpedo "perfectly match" the schematics of a torpedo that North Korea has tried to sell abroad, investigators said.

South Korean President Lee Myung-bak vowed "stern action" in response, and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in Tokyo on Friday that the allies will respond to this "act of aggression." But if the West's habit of dealing with North Korea holds, the condemnations will prove to be temporary and soon the U.S. will again be coaxing Pyongyang back to the six-party talks, or some other fruitless diplomatic exercise.

China, the North's main benefactor and one of those six parties, signaled this future when it merely called the incident "unfortunate" and didn't back Seoul's judgments. Imagine China's reaction if a South Korean torpedo had sunk a Chinese ship in the Yellow Sea, even accidentally.

The current U.S. policy goes by the name of "strategic patience." Whatever that means in theory, in practice it entails continuing to engage Kim Jong Il, albeit with decent intervals between his serial outrages. In December, Mrs. Clinton described nuclear talks with the North as "quite positive" following a visit to Pyongyang by State Department envoy Stephen Bosworth.



President Obama also sent Kim a personal letter spelling out a "future vision" for the two countries, including the promise of a peace treaty, a guarantee of regime security and economic aid in exchange for the North's

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economic aid in exchange for the North's denuclearization. The North's response arrived by torpedo.

The unprovoked attack shows again how little interest Kim has in any kind of peace. Kim will never abandon his nuclear arsenal: It gives him international leverage, allows

him to bargain for one Western concession after another, and limits what his victims can do in response to his provocations.

Engaging Kim has done little to improve his behavior, except in brief intervals, and if anything that behavior has become worse since Mr. Obama took office. So much for the canard that the North's belligerence is all a reaction to George W. Bush.

How could the allies change their dysfunctional diplomacy? For starters, they could recognize that the nuclear talks are likely to go nowhere, and that the North is certain to cheat on any agreement it does sign. They could also return North Korea to the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism and tighten the financial, antiproliferation and other sanctions, while cutting off all cash and other aid that props up the regime.

The larger strategic insight is to recognize that North Korea won't change until Kim dies or his regime falls. The goal of the West should be to increase pressure on the North toward the latter goal, especially given signs of increasing discontent in the North.

An abrupt currency revaluation in December led to previously unthinkable open protests and forced Kim to backtrack. The World Food Program anticipates another major food shortage. North Koreans are increasingly aware of how hollow the regime's propaganda is, thanks in part to Radio Free Asia, the Voice of America and broadcasts from North Korean defectors living in the South.

The Administration could also announce that its "future vision" is for a united and democratic Korea, similar to the united and democratic Germany that Mr. Obama celebrated in his famous Berlin speech. Supporters of engagement will decry this as provocative, but it will put the North on notice that the U.S. no longer accepts its legitimacy as a given.

After years of South Korea's failed "Sunshine Policy," President Lee might welcome such a shift in the wake of the Cheonan murders. Japan is likely to go along given its own disputes over North Korea's kidnappings of its citizens. And while China will object, the long U.S. attempt to persuade Beijing to control its client has nothing to show for it. A more serious and united U.S., South Korean and Japanese response might cause China to act like a more responsible power.

No one can predict how North Korea would respond, but that is also true now. If Kim and his generals can sink a South Korean ship without serious consequences, they might well conclude that they should escalate. The proper response is to give up the illusions of engagement, and methodically and coolly treat the North as the rogue state it is.

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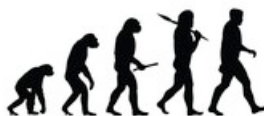
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