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Facing a Nuclear North Korea

By Dan Blumenthal

Why has more than a decade of diplomacy and engagement failed to prevent North Korea from attaining nuclear weapons? Because Pyongyang's nuclear aspirations go to the core of the regime's raison d'être—ensuring its own survival and forcefully unifying the peninsula under its control. So long as the regime is willing to pursue its nuclear program even as its people starve and its economy lies in shambles, the chances are very remote that the United States can persuade Pyongyang to abandon nuclearization. In addition, China remains unwilling to use its leverage—the provision of most of the DPRK's fuel and food—to coerce Kim Jong Il to disarm. The impending failure of the six-party talks necessitates a reassessment of U.S. policy on North Korea. The only viable option for the United States today is to pursue a strategy of containment and deterrence against the use or proliferation of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction.

After the United States confronted North Korea in late 2002 with evidence that Pyongyang violated the Agreed Framework on its nuclear reactors and related facilities, proponents of multilateral negotiations within the Bush administration made the reasonable bet that if faced with a united front of Russia, South Korea, Japan, the United States, and China, Pyongyang would back down from its nuclear ambitions. But this gamble was undermined by two flawed assumptions: that all parties held North Korean denuclearization as their top priority, and that North Korea could be talked into abandoning its nuclear program.

The primary benefit of the six-party talks may have been to reveal just how flawed those assumptions were. For very different reasons, two of the critical players in those talks—China and South Korea—are unwilling to coerce North Korea to disarm. While Beijing would rather see a nuclear-free North Korea, it fears that pressuring Pyongyang by halting shipments of food and fuel might result in the regime's collapse and chaos on China's northeastern border.

Likewise, the current leadership in Seoul is beholden to delusions born during the era of inter-Korean engagement under former president Kim Dae Jung's "sunshine policy." Although the sunshine policy was an understandable approach by Seoul to capitalize on the hoped-for nonproliferation breakthrough presented by the Agreed Framework in 1994, Pyongyang's 2002 admission that it had a highly enriched uranium program made plain that it did not uphold its end of the "engagement" bargain. However, Seoul remains unwilling to come to terms with the fact that the sunshine policy has neither made South Korea safer nor led to reform in North Korea.

Some members of the Bush administration are still trying to breathe life into the six-party talks, as indicated by the recent meeting between North Korean envoys and State Department officials in New York. Concurrently, other administration officials are arguing in favor of putting more pressure on China and North Korea. This divergence of views is reflective of a lack of coherence in American policy. As it becomes clearer every day that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) cannot be talked out of nuclear weapons, it is high time for the

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United States to formulate a new, more coherent North Korea policy.

Why the Six-Party Talks Failed

The reason the multilateral diplomatic approach has failed has primarily to do with the nature of the Kim regime, but is also rooted in the behavior of China and South Korea.

China: Stability First

China has a number of goals in its North Korea policy. While Beijing would prefer the Kim regime did not possess nuclear weapons, China's primary objective is the survival of that regime in order to avoid instability or warfare on its border. Beijing is also approaching this crisis with an eye toward its long-term goal of becoming the pre-eminent power in Asia. This means enhancing China's diplomatic prestige in Asia and avoiding the emergence of a unified Korea that is allied with the United States.

Because of these foreign policy preferences, the Chinese leadership is satisfied with the status quo—North Korea's de facto nuclearization, intermittent diplomacy to lower tensions on the peninsula, and sustaining the Kim regime through plentiful aid. Beijing has also reaped symbolic benefits from moderating the six-party talks, as it portrays itself as the region's honest broker, more flexible and diplomatically dexterous than either the bullying Americans or the rogue North Koreans. Beijing's concern with Kim's survival is illustrated by its increased trade with North Korea since the crisis began: according to the *Washington Post*, bilateral trade between China and North Korea "nearly doubled between 2002 and 2004 to \$1.39 billion."¹ And, an additional benefit from Beijing's point of view is the strain in the alliance between America and the Republic of Korea (ROK).

South Korea: Trapped in a Cycle of Appeasement

The ROK has less nefarious motivations for its policy, but it is nonetheless unwilling to pressure Pyongyang. Since President Kim Dae Jung promulgated his sunshine policy in the 1990s, South Korea has been trapped in a cycle of appeasing Pyongyang. Seoul's desire to persuade Pyongyang to reform its economy and give up its nuclear aspirations is understandable. After decades of living under siege, the South Koreans hoped that the 1994 Framework Agreement represented a diplomatic

breakthrough that would lay the groundwork for peaceful unification.

Engagement is not always the wrong policy. For engagement to succeed, however, several conditions must hold: the regime being engaged has to see reform as a national interest, and the engaging party must have effective carrots and sticks with which to drive engagement. In the case of North Korea, neither of these conditions was met. Pyongyang is uninterested in economic reform, and even less interested in abandoning its nuclear program. In addition, Seoul discovered that it has few diplomatic sticks at its disposal short of military action. Caring little about the welfare of his people, Kim is not concerned by the withdrawal of food aid. Moreover, few economic sanctions are available, given that North Korea exports little more than narcotics, missiles, and technology related to weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

The reason that Seoul became mired in engagement despite its failures has been explained by Peter Feaver of Duke University in a different context: because engagement values process over substance, engagers develop incentives to overlook the engagee's bad faith and ignore the fact that no actual objectives are being met.² How else can one explain why South Korea has increased its trade with the DPRK since the six-party talks stalled late last year? Despite North Korea's continued violations of previous commitment and a continued hostile posture, in the first three months of 2005 alone, trade with the North increased 58 percent over the same period in the previous year.³ The South Korean claim that such economic exchange prevents Pyongyang from even worse behavior demonstrates how easy it is for engagement to shift into appeasement.

In addition, because South Korea's engagement policy set such high popular expectations for lasting reconciliation, the South Korean government and people are more willing to identify the United States as the obstacle to diplomatic breakthrough rather than acknowledge Pyongyang's recalcitrance. This dynamic explains the South Korean government's behavior since the 2002 crisis: it has publicly questioned the Bush administration's October 2002 statement that North Korea had admitted to having a highly enriched uranium program, dismissed the hostile interception of a U.S. reconnaissance plane by North Korean fighters as "predictable," and has repeatedly played down North Korean nuclear threats as a "bargaining chip."⁴ Most recently, South Korea removed any reference to North Korea as a "main enemy" in its 2005

defense white paper. These acts have affected public opinion: in a January 2005 poll, 39 percent of respondents identified the United States as the “country most threatening to South Korea,” while only 33 percent identified North Korea as such.⁵ If the leadership in Seoul does not awaken from its fantasies, the prospects for an enduring U.S.–Korean alliance will become even dimmer.

North Korea’s Objectives

After more than a decade of nuclear talks with North Korea, it has become clear that North Korea’s objective of attaining a nuclear arsenal is an “enduring and unshakable commitment, a top state priority,” which diplomacy will not change.⁶ Indeed, Nicholas Eberstadt and Joseph Ferguson have persuasively summarized the lessons learned after repeatedly probing North Korea’s intentions through negotiations:

Over the past dozen years Western diplomacy has devoted no small effort to probing [North Korean intentions]. In the early 1990s, the ROK . . . probed them for two years, eventually securing a Joint North–South Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean peninsula in 1992. When the agreement collapsed, the Clinton administration and the U.S. government probed Pyongyang’s intentions with a year and a half of diplomacy that culminated in the 1994 Agreed Framework. The Clinton administration probed North Korean intentions still further through what became known as the “Perry Process.” And, of course Kim Dae Jung probed North Korean intentions with his now-discredited “sunshine policy.” Reviewing this record one might suggest we actually have a fairly good idea of North Korea’s nuclear intentions.⁷

Although the North Korean government claims that it has only pursued nuclear weapons in response to America’s hostile attitude, both Kim and his father pursued such weapons consistently and steadfastly for over two decades, through economic hardship and famine, and without regard to U.S. hostility or friendliness.⁸ Indeed, the highly enriched uranium program that the United States detected in late 2002 had been underway since about 1997–98, the heyday of both Clinton-era engagement and South Korea’s sunshine policy.⁹ The only reasonable conclusion is that having nuclear weapons is perceived as a vital necessity for a regime whose

fundamental national goal is to reunify the peninsula by force under its rule.

U.S. Policy Objectives

As the United States comes to terms with the inability of diplomacy to achieve the disarming of North Korea, it has an opportunity to reassess its North Korea policy and clarify its priorities on the peninsula.

*The first U.S. priority is “keeping the world’s most dangerous weapons out of the hands of the most dangerous regimes.”*¹⁰ Although America has failed to achieve this in North Korea, it should still aim to restrict what Pyongyang does with its WMD arsenal. The primary concern today should be what then-deputy secretary of defense Paul Wolfowitz called Kim Jong Il’s willingness to “sell anything to anybody.”¹¹ Thus, the primary U.S. objective should now be to prevent Kim from selling or giving his nuclear weapons or any other weapons of mass destruction to either another rogue state or to a terrorist organization. The protection of the U.S. homeland, allies, and friends from a North Korean–assisted WMD terrorist attack should now take priority over the futile attempts to roll back the DPRK’s weapons program.

The second priority is the maintenance of alliance commitments, especially to South Korea and Japan. A nuclear North Korea changes the balance of deterrence in the region—and requires the U.S. nuclear umbrella to be extended and credible. Just as our allies lived with the nuclear threat from the Soviets, it is not unreasonable to formulate policies that protect and reassure Japan and South Korea.

The third priority is to maintain and bolster the U.S.-led security order in Asia, especially as China moves to use its growing power and influence to undermine it. On this account, the United States has already lost ground during the six-party talks. China has successfully taken advantage of the U.S. lack of coherence to portray Washington as inflexible and as an obstacle to resolving the issue.

The fourth priority is keeping U.S. commitments to the spread of democracy and human rights throughout the world. In the case of North Korea, it may well be impossible to substantially improve human rights conditions or promote democracy under the regime of Kim Jong Il. But, a commitment to publicly highlighting and using whatever means possible to promote human rights in North Korea will help undermine the regime with an eye toward eventually helping a more humane North Korean leadership come to power.

Policy Options

As statesmen throughout the ages have discovered, foreign policy is the art of selecting among bad options. This rings true with respect to North Korea, where policy options are restricted to pursuing more attempts to talk North Korea into abandoning its weapons program; a military attack on North Korea's WMD facilities; a policy of regime change by force; or a containment policy that also works to undermine the Kim regime over time.

Jaw-Jaw. . .

Because Washington was focused on military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, it allowed the six-party talks to drift and let the Chinese and North Koreans set the timing and all too often the agenda of the talks. To its credit, the Bush administration refused to buy off the DPRK as the Kim regime raised the ante. However, the administration's approach to North Korea—a combination of tough pronouncements and efforts to block proliferation and other bad behavior, all the while going along with the meandering six-party talks, did not amount to a coherent policy.

The talks will continue to fail for the simple reason that there are very few compelling ways to threaten the North Koreans short of military force. Most proponents of bilateral negotiations or a "grand bargain" argue for a set of inducements and punishments aimed at changing North Korean policy. While inducements are plentiful (e.g., economic aid, enhanced prestige, security assurances), there is not much the administration can do to punish Kim short of attacking. There is no economic exchange to block, and Kim has always been unmoved in response to the reduction of food aid. The Chinese can cut off the North Korean regime's lifeline, but they are unwilling to do so.

A bargain of the kind that was recently proposed by Senators Hillary Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Carl Levin (D-Mich.) is beset with the problem of an absence of credible "sticks." There is no reason for Pyongyang to believe, even after a round of "more serious" bilateral diplomacy, that China and Russia will agree to refer the matter for UN sanctions. China will not be any less concerned about the collapse of the North Korean regime even if another round of diplomacy places the blame for failure squarely with Pyongyang.¹²

Given the paucity of sticks, it is no surprise that since North Korea's October 2002 confession that it had a

secret highly enriched uranium program and during talks that succeeded it, the North faced no punishment for its bad behavior. It has not faced a single sanction for its violation of its 1994 commitments, its subsequent expelling of International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors at the Yongbyon nuclear facility, its reactivation of Yongbyon, and its reprocessing of plutonium from 8,000 spent fuel rods that were stored there. Nor has proliferation been punished. In early 2005, the United States announced that it was near certain that North Korea had provided Libya with processed uranium after 9/11. The fact that the Bush administration did not punish Kim for these offenses is not for lack of will—it highlights the fact that there are no punishments except the use of force, which is unduly risky.

Previous U.S. engagement with North Korea amounted to the provision of aid that allowed Kim to prop up his regime and pursue his nuclear ambitions. The Agreed Framework kept the Kim regime alive. Since 1995 Washington has provided over \$1 billion in foreign assistance to North Korea, "about 60 percent in the form of food aid and 40 percent in the form of energy assistance."¹³ As Eberstadt points out, given North Korea's economic performance, "Washington's foreign aid lifeline to the DPRK . . . looks more significant than any Washington has arranged in recent years for allies and friends."¹⁴ Unless Washington wants a policy that is aimed at propping up Kim without getting anything in return, a new form of engagement makes little sense.

. . . War-War?

An immediate option for dealing with North Korea's nuclear program would be to conduct surgical, preemptive strikes against North Korean facilities to eliminate the nuclear threat. This option is all the more appealing when one considers America's preponderance in intelligence gathering capabilities, stealth bomber aircraft, standoff munitions, and bunker-busting bombs; however, the risks of such an attack far outweigh the likely benefits. Since Israel preemptively destroyed the Iraqi Osirak nuclear reactor at Tuwaitah in 1981, would-be nuclear proliferators have taken a variety of concealment measures in order to prevent the key components of their nuclear weapons manufacturing process from being identified and targeted. North Korea, as the world's most closed society, has been able to undertake significant measures in this regard, and the United States has not even been able to successfully identify its uranium enrichment facilities, a key component of its nuclear program. Thus, it is not

clear that a preemptive, surgical strike would be able to identify and destroy targets inside of the DPRK.

There is also the problem of how Pyongyang would react. North Korea has 70 percent of its 1,003,000 ground forces personnel deployed along the Demilitarized Zone boundary between the two Koreas, including approximately 4,000 tanks and assault guns, and 2,500 armored personnel carriers.¹⁵ North Korea possesses some 100 No-dong missiles that could strike civilian and military targets in Japan, possibly with WMD warheads.¹⁶ If the DPRK leadership truly believed that it had nothing to lose, its Taep'o-dong 2 missile force can strike the continental United States. In short, were North Korea to retaliate for surgical strikes, it has great military capabilities with which to do so.

Forceful regime change is even less attractive. It cannot be done through airpower alone—any such strategy would require a substantial commitment of ground troops for combat operations, securing weapons sites, and stabilization operations. Leaving aside the strain on a U.S. military that does not have enough ground troops for its current missions, such a strategy would require active South Korean support, which is highly unlikely. In addition, defense planners cannot rule out the possibility that China would meet its treaty obligations to assist in the defense of North Korea.

Containment and Deterrence

In light of the fatal failings of both the military and engagement option, containment and deterrence is the only feasible policy. The policy accepts that the United States and its allies have been unable to prevent North Korea from acquiring nuclear weapons after more than a decade of trying, but that they still have the chance to prevent their use. A containment and deterrence policy is not satisfying—it keeps in place one of the worst abusers of human rights and international norms left in the world—and not without risks. But it does offer a chance for America to achieve its other objectives. It also has the advantage of coherence and clarity, the basis of political leadership. Other interested countries would be faced with the choice of getting behind a policy aimed at preventing the use of nuclear weapons or undermining it.

Containment and Deterrence

The title of John Lewis Gaddis's classic *Strategies of Containment* indicates that the term "containment" can inspire a variety of specific policy recommendations. The

term first entered the American foreign policy lexicon in George Kennan's seminal 1947 essay, "Sources of Soviet Behavior." The key concepts of Kennan's theory have some utility for understanding how to formulate a similar policy towards North Korea. Like the Soviet Union, North Korean "policy [bears] little relationship to what the West [does or does] not do [because] the Party line . . . arises mainly from basic [domestic] necessities."¹⁷ Likewise, Kennan identified the source of North Korea's implacability today fifty years ago when he wrote that "there could be no permanent resolution of differences with . . . a government, which relied on the fiction of external threat to maintain its internal legitimacy."¹⁸ Because North Korea's foreign policy is aimed primarily at keeping a Stalinist regime in power, it needs external threats to do so and consequently views international relations as a zero-sum game.

Kennan defined a strategy of containment as the steady application of "counter-pressure" or "counter-force" against all attempts to expand its power and influence.¹⁹ Strategist Paul Nitze expanded upon Kennan's prescription of containment by stating that the government should: "[Employ] all means short of war to . . . block further expansion of Soviet power . . . and so foster the seeds of destruction within the Soviet system that the Kremlin is brought at least to the point of modifying its behavior to conform to generally accepted international standards."²⁰

From these initial concepts of containment grew strategies aimed at deterring the Soviets from using their formidable conventional and later nuclear arsenal to expand their territory and sphere of influence. Strategists came up with ways to deter Soviet expansionism through punishment and denial—the Soviets would face a devastating nuclear retaliation or be denied their objectives through defensive actions. Deterrence needed credibility, for unless the Soviet leadership believed that the United States would act upon its policy of nuclear retaliation, threats to do so would ring hollow.

Obviously, there is no perfect analogy between North Korea and Stalin's Soviet Union. North Korea is a middling power that, with the exception of South Korea, has neither the intention of or capability for territorial expansion. It has a failing economy and an unappealing ideology. However, Pyongyang's *raison d'être* presents a threat to international security. The state is built to ensure the survival of the regime and to forcefully unify with the South under the "independent, socialist" rule of the DPRK.²¹ To conduct such a war and realize such a

vision, the North needs nuclear weapons that can be used against the United States, the only country that can frustrate its designs.

Based upon this terrifying reality, a containment policy's objectives would be (1) continuing to protect of South Korea from attack; (2) deterring a nuclear or conventional attack on the U.S. homeland or on its allies and friends; and (3) preventing the proliferation of North Korea of WMD to rogue regimes and terrorist organizations.

The containment policy would have four main elements: (1) a declaratory policy that America will respond with nuclear weapons if North Korea attacks its allies or interests with nuclear weapons; (2) a shoring up of the defenses of allies and friends under threat of North Korean attack; (3) increased interdiction of North Korean shipments of WMD material; and (4) an increased campaign to highlight and ameliorate North Korean human rights abuses.

Some of the essential tools of statecraft are already in place to build such a policy: the United States military has a robust presence in East Asia and the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI) has been set up to interdict North Korean ships that may have WMD aboard. But the policy will require additional measures: U.S. force posture in the region must be adjusted to provide a more credible nuclear deterrent, and the PSI must be bolstered to make it effective in interdicting illicit North Korean cargoes. In addition, much as during the Cold War, more attention should be given to North Korea's atrocious human records to foster the demise of the regime.

Rethinking Our Military Posture

North Korea has formidable military capabilities which make its threats to turn Seoul and Tokyo into "seas of fire" an effective tool of intimidation.²² So long as such gruesome imagery captures the popular imagination, the leadership in Pyongyang would be justified in discounting the credibility of a U.S. containment policy that hinges on retaliation. In response, America must make its conventional and nuclear deterrence capability more credible.

The United States must improve its ability to defend civilian populations in South Korea, Japan, and the United States. To do this, the United States must first upgrade its counter-battery capabilities on the Korean Peninsula. Under an October 2003 agreement, the United States will maintain its forward-deployed counter-battery radar and multiple-launch rocket systems close to the demilitarized zone.²³ However, these are not all of the

counter-battery resources that would be necessary to respond to a North Korean attack: most U.S. counter-battery capabilities are still in the United States, and would probably not arrive in South Korea in time to prevent heavy losses.²⁴ Especially as the United States government shifts troops away from the DMZ, it should consider bolstering stand-alone counter-battery units in the area.

In addition, the United States should improve the missile defenses of South Korea and Japan, as well as its own. A first step would be to push for U.S.-ROK-Japanese trilateral cooperation on sea-based missile defense. After the first South Korean AEGIS-equipped KDX destroyer is deployed in 2008, all three countries will have the AEGIS platform. Although the current political disputes between Seoul and Tokyo over their history together and the Tokdo/Takeshima Islands is hindering substantial Korean-Japanese cooperation, the two countries share a common threat from North Korea's missile capabilities and have great incentives to cooperate. In addition, the United States should push Tokyo, Seoul, and other regional friends to deploy as many PAC-3 missile defense systems as possible.

One option for strengthening the U.S. regional defense posture would be to deploy an additional aircraft carrier group to the region as well as bombers and surface combatants.²⁵ Other possibilities include reverting back to a U.S. policy of neither confirming nor denying the presence of its own nuclear weapons on the peninsula, and increasing the presence of submarines armed with nuclear ballistic missiles.²⁶

The United States also must make sure it has the ground forces and South Korean support to rapidly occupy North Korea if all out war did break out. South Korea has some 650,000 ground troops, who would logically form the core of any occupation force following a war against North Korea, but the United States has a comparative advantage in two key areas: kicking down the door and securing suspected WMD and ballistic missile sites. The current size of U.S. ground forces is insufficient to execute this mission.

Proliferation Security Initiative in the Long Run

The Proliferation Security Initiative has worked fairly well at interdicting North Korean ships and aircraft whose cargo include WMD-related material. Currently, it works mostly through the seizure of cargo in the ports of participating countries under the authority of that country's domestic laws. Participating countries have the authority to seize cargo from ships in their territorial

waters or from aircraft in their airspace. The major gap is interdiction on the high seas, which is still contrary to international law. Countries are getting around this stumbling block by signing boarding agreements.²⁷ The other big gap is that government vehicles cannot be interdicted. The Bush administration and some of its allies are trying to plug this and other gaps. They have strengthened the PSI by securing passage of UN Security Council Resolution 1540, which calls on states to formulate more effective measures to interdict and control WMD that is within or passes through its borders.

However, a containment policy would require greater efforts to interdict shipments of WMD from North Korea, find ways to seize cargo on the high seas, and plan for escalation should North Korea be caught proliferating. The new U.S. declaratory policy should also say that if North Korea is caught proliferating WMD the United States will move to quarantine North Korea.

Planning for Victory

The other pillar of Nitze's containment strategy cannot be ignored: "fostering the seeds of destruction" of the Kim regime. Military pressure alone cannot accomplish that goal. Instead, the United States should mostly use the tools of "soft power" that prevailed against the Soviet Union. In the case of North Korea this means according greater weight to and raising the profile of the refugee issue and North Korean human rights abuses.

U.S. human rights policy should focus on China and South Korea. China is forcibly repatriating thousands of North Korean refugees by classifying them as economic migrants. These repatriated North Koreans face sure persecution if not death. According to the State Department's Arthur Dewey, China's refusal to allow the UN High Commissioner on Refugees the opportunity to determine whether these North Koreans qualify for refugee protection raises "the possibility [that] legitimate refugees are being returned involuntarily to persecution, the PRC's treaty [1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol] obligations are being violated."²⁸ Diplomatic efforts have not convinced the Chinese to abandon this policy because China's top priority is the survival of the Kim regime. However, given China's desire to be perceived as a responsible international player, shame may work. The United States should raise the profile of China's abrogation of its international commitments and the human rights abuses of North Koreans.

The South Koreans have not been much better. In December 2004, the ROK's Unification Ministry

announced that it was slashing the government's resettlement stipend for North Korean refugees,²⁹ and it has abstained from voting in favor of a UN Commission on Human Rights resolution condemning North Korea three years in a row. America may have more luck over time convincing the ROK to take a more humane approach to the refugee and human rights issues in North Korea—after all, South Korea is a constitutional democracy that respects the rights of its own people. A policy of receiving and resettling North Koreans will help the South shape reconciliation with the North when the Kim regime eventually falls.

The United States should also bring the European Union (EU) into discussions on the human rights situation in North Korea, especially UN Security Council members France and the United Kingdom. As America learned in the transatlantic debate on lifting the EU arms embargo on China, human rights issues resonate inside Europe. Cooperation with Europe on the North Korean human rights situation may have both moral and strategic payoffs—especially if America is forced to take military action against Pyongyang.

The passage by Congress of the North Korean Human Rights Act, and the appointment by the administration of a Special Envoy for North Korean human rights will go a long way to highlight the abuses of the Kim regime, modestly improve the plight of the North Koreans, and, over time, undermine Kim's control. These actions are helped by a containment policy that frees the United States from having to go along with playing down the human rights issue in the service of diplomatic process: America can speak truthfully and forcefully about the crimes of the Kim regime.

Risks of a Containment Policy

One key risk in a containment policy is that the alliance with South Korea would be permanently damaged. A declared policy of containment could either shock South Koreans out of their delusions that appeasement will work or so harden opinion against the United States that the alliance is no longer sustainable. The risk can be mitigated by a speech by the president or the secretary of state directly to the South Korean people that says: (1) over a decade of diplomacy and engagement has failed to prevent a nuclear North Korea; (2) we do not want a war and are therefore choosing to deter one; and (3) our deterrence will be credible and will protect the South Korean people. If this still does not convince them, the United States must go forward anyway—in

the post-9/11 security environment North Korean nuclear weapons are not simply a Korean peninsula problem, they are a threat to global security.

A second risk is that Kim cannot be deterred. The 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States* (NSS) reaffirmed the option of preemptive action against rogue regimes and terrorist networks who sought WMD and were not deterred by “the conventional superiority of the United States.”³⁰ This concern was one of the factors influencing the decision to use force to remove Saddam Hussein from power. A containment policy against North Korea would rely on traditional deterrence based upon both defenses and the threat of retaliation, as described in the NSS. However, the opacity of the Kim regime leaves open the question of whether he will understand the U.S. commitment to protecting its interests, and the U.S. readiness to use force, including nuclear weapons in order to do so. Kim’s understanding of these messages is critical to successfully deterring him. A containment policy will also be difficult to implement if South Korea and China refuse to go along with it. As many experts have pointed out, it is difficult to detect the passage of plutonium needed for a bomb—which is roughly the size of a soccer ball—by air shipment. But this is where the declared threat of retaliation is essential.

Despite these risks, a containment policy would have the best chance of achieving the top national priority—protecting the lives of Americans. In addition, a containment policy would reassert American leadership on a problem that all nations in the region face—the WMD threat. And, America would take a leading role in raising the profile of the human rights and refugee issue on the international stage—its “comparative advantage” over China in the soft power competition. What is more, the policy would have the distinct advantage of clarity—interested countries would have to choose between supporting a policy that endeavors to stop the spread and use of WMD or to undermine it. If Beijing openly opposed the containment policy it would be complicit in the spread of weapons of mass destruction. At the least, U.S. policymakers could have a clearer sense that the United States and China do not share common goals on the most important questions of national security—and that may lead to a more realistic China policy.

The Best of a Bad Lot

North Korea’s development of nuclear weapons is one of the most vexing foreign policy problems that the Bush

administration faces. It is understandable that the government has had a difficult time formulating a coherent policy. A new policy must face a number of realities:

- North Korea already is a nuclear power and will not be talked into ceasing to be one.
- The United States and its allies have very few sticks to use aside from military action—which is why engagement with North Korea has failed and will continue to fail.
- The current lack of coherence and complicity in the fiction that North Korea can still be prevented from becoming a nuclear power is harming America’s leadership position in Asia.
- Military options either to remove nuclear weapons or remove the regime are too costly.

The only viable option is an unpleasant one: containment and deterrence with an eye toward undermining the regime over the longer-term. This option may be risky, but not nearly as risky as either staying with the current ineffectual approach or adopting a policy of direct confrontation would be.

Notes

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27. Sharon Squassori, "Report to Congress: Proliferation Security Initiative," Congressional Research Service, January 14, 2005, 4.

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