

The Time-Out Method Doesn't Work

By John Feffer

For the past two years, the Bush administration has treated North Korea like a child throwing a tantrum. Rather than charm a crying child with a piece of cake or apply a switch to its backside, the current child psychology approach is the “time out”—separate the child from the group until it calms down. Similarly, the Bush administration has hoped that isolating and ignoring North Korea will make it “come to its senses” and stop bothering the other kids in the playroom.

But North Korea is still putting up a fuss. In recent weeks, it threatened to restart reactors that make bomb-grade plutonium and to end a unilateral moratorium on missile testing. It withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and is also likely continuing with an alternative uranium enrichment program. In response, the United States has cut off fuel shipments and delayed food aid, but has so far ruled out a military option. The multilateralism-averse Bush administration even wants to bring the problem to the United Nations. In the degraded political atmosphere in Washington, with a war pending in Iraq and unilateralism run amok, this non-apocalyptic approach to North Korea passes for diplomacy.

Diplomacy it is not. Diplomacy resolved the last nuclear standoff on the Korean peninsula after Jimmy Carter's intervention in 1994 preempted the Pentagon's planned preemptive strike. Thereafter, the Clinton administration treated North Korea like a donkey that could be prodded along the path of appropriate international behavior by an alternation of carrots and sticks. North Korea, always aspiring to be the master of its ever more circumscribed fate, bridled at the manipulation. It also felt that the United States was not living up to its side of the 1994 bargain. Instead of two light-water reactors to be completed by 2003, it was the proud possessor of largely empty dormitories and a big hole in the ground. More critically, it expected

diplomatic recognition out of the 1994 Agreed Framework and with it, eventually, the capital to restore its sagging economy. For this, it might have suspended its nuclear program and missile exports, a package deal that Clinton was contemplating at the rump end of his administration.

The Bush administration decisively rejected Clinton's carrot-and-stick approach. It threw additional burrs (troop concentrations, conventional weaponry) into the negotiations with North Korea that doomed the talks. It snubbed Kim Dae Jung and his engagement policy. It further isolated the already isolated country by lumping North Korea with Iran and Iraq in an “axis of evil.” It looked for ways to unravel the Agreed Framework.

The “time-out” strategy is really a form of pre-emption without intervention. U.S. conservatives have expected Kim Jong Il to fall ever since the day he took over from his deceased father in 1994. Hardliners in Congress expected the Agreed Framework to be rendered irrelevant by regime collapse in Pyongyang. More recently, hawks in the Bush administration pushed for a military option when the current crisis broke. But the State Department is mindful of how countries in the region feel about war with North Korea. South Korea doesn't want to suffer the lion's share of the casualties resulting from such a conflict. Japan remains hesitant, and China outright opposes the military option. Meanwhile the North Korean government soldiers on, following the Cuban example by shifting the blame for its problems onto U.S. intransigence.

North Korea is no donkey, nor is it a child throwing a tantrum. It is a sovereign state with a large but weak military, a malnourished population, a struggling economy, a tightly controlled political sphere, and an unenviable human rights record. At the same time, North

Korea has renounced international terrorism, has not attacked any of its neighbors, and has repeatedly expressed interest in joining international organizations such as the Asian Development Bank and the International Monetary Fund. North Korea wants to play with others, but on its own terms.

North Korea has signaled its willingness to negotiate a way out of the current crisis. It would consider rejoining the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty if the United States resumes heavy fuel oil shipments as mandated under the 1994 Agreed Framework. It would suspend its nuclear program if the United States provided an assurance of non-aggression. "We have no intention of invading North Korea," President Bush has said several times. But Pyongyang wants more—a pledge of non-intervention that would extend beyond simply invasion—and wants it in writing.

The Bush administration has announced that it is open to talks,

but not to negotiations. For a government that has routinely downplayed the importance of the UN, the insistence on bringing the matter to a multilateral body when North Korea insists on direct negotiations borders on the perverse. The Bush administration has made it clear that North Korea must stop its nuclear program first before negotiations can begin. But this seems rather unfair for the weaker side, particularly one facing the strongest country in history and its stated doctrine of regime change and pre-emptive strikes. Diplomacy requires give-and-take. There is no give in the Bush administration.

The Bush administration wants regime change, not non-proliferation, and not engagement with North Korea. But regime change, even if it could be accomplished, would not likely produce the behavioral change that the Bush administration wants. There are no North Korean Vaclav Havels waiting to take over and usher in civil society. There is no shadow government percolating among

defectors in other countries. There are no safeguards in place to deal with whatever nuclear material exists in North Korea should the current regime collapse. South Korea does not have an express unification plan or any great desire to spend the billions of dollars necessary to handle a crisis-wracked area. Isolating and ignoring North Korea brought us to the current crisis. It's time to throw away the "time-out" strategy and invite North Korea back to the table to hammer out an alternative to Korean War II.

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