

Pyongyang 1, Bush 0

By John Feffer | October 10, 2006

Five years ago, when George W. Bush took office, North Korea didn't claim membership in the nuclear club. Its plutonium reprocessing facilities were frozen. It was even willing to negotiate away its missile program.

Instead of pursuing the diplomatic route, the Bush administration tried to ignore Pyongyang. Then came the schoolyard taunts such as lumping North Korea together with Iraq and Iran in an "axis of evil." When indifference and insult failed to move the isolated East Asian country, the administration accused North Korea of enriching uranium, which led to the unraveling of the 1994 Agreed Framework and the reigniting of a major crisis. To top it off, Washington began to squeeze Pyongyang economically with sanctions.

Pyongyang has refused to cry "uncle." Instead, it has replied in kind. With its missile launches in July and its recently announced nuclear test, Pyongyang has demonstrated that it can be as stubborn and as enamored of military playthings as the Bush administration.

With such a miserable track record in inducing behavior change, why has the United States continued to speak loudly and wield a big stick against a hornet's nest like North Korea? It might be, like North Korea's recent test, a fundamental miscalculation. The Bush administration, after all, has shown a pathological inability to learn from its mistakes. Or there might be a deeper, more malign intent at work.

Wave Stick, Hornet Stings

At first, the Bush administration followed the logic of its predecessors. It looked at North Korea through the prism of Eastern Europe. With a little nudge, the regime was supposed to topple just like the communist governments in Warsaw, Bucharest, and East Berlin. But North Korea showed remarkable resilience, surviving the collapse of its Soviet trading partner, several years of extreme famine in the mid-1990s, and then the containment-plus tactics of the Bush administration.

In the absence of a dramatic coup or military putsch in Pyongyang, the Bush administration had to demonstrate that it was not just twiddling its thumbs while North Korea unfroze its plutonium reprocessing facilities and moved full-speed ahead toward a nuclear arsenal. The faintest whiff of weapons of mass destruction had justified U.S. military intervention in Iraq. And all the United States could do with North Korea was call it names?

Thus were born the Six Party Talks, a multilateral effort involving the two Koreas, China, Russia, Japan, and the United States. A remarkable group of diplomats gathered to talk, but alas, not to negotiate. Guided by the uncompromising Vice President Dick Cheney, the Bush administration has viewed any meaningful negotiations with North Korea—and the prospect of any serious agreement—as simply prolonging the lifespan of



Kim Jong Il's regime. The State Department was on a short leash. The Bush administration refused to negotiate bilaterally, North Korea's negotiating process of choice. In the Bush-Cheney lexicon, compromise equals appeasement and "Munich" stops all conversations.

Here's what the problem with the strategy of point-less talking was: North Korea was not satisfied with cat-and-mouse maneuvers. Its economy reeling and its population malnourished, the North Korean government wanted a deal. And the only thing worth trading that it possessed—or that the world thought it possessed—was a nuclear program.

The recent nuclear test is the logical consequence of the North's policy over the last four years. It developed a nuclear program to deter U.S. attacks, but it also needed a bargaining chip to trade for status, cash, and other goodies. It froze its nuclear program under the 1994 Agreed Framework, but probably kept some reprocessed plutonium in reserve just in case and began a covert uranium-enrichment program as a similar insurance policy. When the Agreed Framework collapsed in 2002, North Korea changed tactics, declaring that it did in fact have nukes, which served to strengthen its deterrent capabilities and increase its ask at the negotiating table.

But the Bush administration wasn't dealing. So North Korea ended its self-imposed missile moratorium last July. And when that didn't get the United States into one-on-one negotiations, it raised the ante once again with a nuclear test.

Such tactics should surprise no one. Pyongyang has begun giving the world advance notice of its actions. Psychologists call these signals a "cry for help." North Korea wants to negotiate, wants to avoid options that are clearly suicidal. But global

911, staffed by the inattentive Bush administration, is just not responding.

External Signal, Internal Audience

The nuclear test is a signal to the international community that North Korea refuses to be disrespected, have its sovereignty abridged, or suffer a full-frontal military assault. But the test also serves various internal purposes.

The staff of the country's nuclear complex—scientists, military officials, and government representatives—have an important stake in seeing their project through to completion. As George Perkovich perceptively argued in his book *India's Nuclear Bomb*, the team developing nuclear weapons is not simply a group of technicians that can be turned on or off depending on government whim. The nuclear complex develops political power within the overall government system. Tasked to create a bomb, it must demonstrate its success or it will lose that power. A nuclear test translates into bonuses and promotions, and consolidated political power within the system.

Another internal rationale is provided by the date of the test: October 9. North Korean leader Kim Jong Il formally took the helm of the Korean Worker's Party on that date in 1997. There have been only two leaders in North Korean history. Kim Il Sung founded the country and, despite often horrendous policies, enjoyed the adulation of the population. With the famine that took place on his watch and the near collapse of the country, Kim Jong Il has squandered his father's legacy.

The nuclear test is, in other words, a rather large example of overcompensation. Economic news out of North Korea hasn't been very positive. Heavy rains and flooding over the summer damaged the country's capacity to feed itself. Financial sanctions

applied by the United States have helped stall any economic reforms. Even China, outraged over the July missile launches, has begun to put a gentle squeeze on its neighbor. There's not a lot of bread in North Korea and, though the Pyongyang Circus is quite good, such performances will not distract the population. Kim Jong Il might have as much charisma as a chunk of anthracite but only a handful of world leaders have pushed their countries past the well-guarded gates of the nuclear club.

But did North Korea really test *the* bomb? The verdict isn't yet in. The recent test might have been just a lot of TNT or it could have been a very small weapon tested unsuccessfully. However, from North Korea's point of view, the perception of deterrence is more important than the reality. It wants to prevent an attack. If the United States and others are scared off by empty underground caverns—like Kumchang-ri in 1999—or by a whole lot of dynamite, so much the cheaper.

To Strike or Not to Strike

Will an attack on North Korea be the administration's October surprise? The rally-around-the-flag effect of bombing North Korea would be overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the immediate consequences, not to mention the longer-term blowback. The Bush administration has insisted on keeping all options on the table, even though the Pentagon has made it clear that a military strike against North Korea would lead to retaliatory attacks that would kill tens of thousands of U.S. and South Korean soldiers and civilians. The Pentagon has also confessed that it would have great difficulty eliminating the dispersed nuclear facilities in North Korea.

For military, economic, and electoral reasons, it doesn't make sense for the Bush administration to

launch an attack against any country at this moment. Alas, the administration seems to be singing only one tune these days, that old Talking Heads favorite: Stop Making Sense. The administration ignored the top-level Pentagon advice on Iraq. It could do so again with North Korea.

If the military option is not really on the table, the Bush administration is running out of choices. It is unveiling a new set of financial sanctions and wants inspections on all cargo going in and out of North Korea. But Pyongyang, while not exactly reveling in its isolation of late, is accustomed to being the odd man out. Kim Jong Il's regime endured several famine years; perhaps it calculates that two more cold-shoulder years from the Bush administration are survivable.

For some in the Bush administration, the nuclear test is cause for celebration. The coterie around Dick Cheney rejoices at the growing divide between North Korea and China, the more aggressive military and foreign policy of Japan, and the compromised efforts of South Korea to engage the North. The nuclear test is the most effective argument the Cheney crowd can use to defeat calls for diplomacy. An amplified North Korean threat works wonders on Capitol Hill and with our allies to push missile defense, more military spending, and the like.

But the recent test has not destroyed the diplomatic option. Pyongyang has reiterated its willingness to negotiate. It doesn't have much choice. A nuclear weapon can't feed its people or rebuild its factories.

The international community, through the UN, should by all means register its outrage at North Korea's act and translate that outrage into some concrete actions. But many years of sanctions

haven't brought North Korea to its knees or back to the negotiating table. It's time for the Bush administration to make up for a half-decade of failed policies by talking seriously with Pyongyang, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Just inside the door, North Korea can still be persuaded to back out of the nuclear club.

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