

Coping with North Korea

By Wade L. Huntley | February 24, 2003

U.S.-North Korea relations are at a point of crisis. Pyongyang's surprise October admission to a secret nuclear weapons program based on uranium enrichment has triggered a cascading breakdown of the 1994 Agreed Framework structure that had kept North Korea's more advanced plutonium-based nuclear program in check. The country has now expelled United Nations inspectors, removed monitoring equipment at its Yongbyon nuclear complex, and begun preparations for reprocessing spent nuclear fuel stored at the site. The North Koreans have long been suspected of possessing sufficient plutonium for one or two nuclear weapons, and this new reprocessing could provide an additional half-dozen weapons' worth of fissile material within a few months. Once the reprocessed plutonium is dispersed to multiple hidden locations, North Korea would be unimpeded in both producing nuclear weapons for its own use and exporting the materials and technologies to whomever comes up with the cash. This twin proliferation danger surpasses even the apex of the 1993-94 crisis that nearly triggered a U.S. military attack.

The Bush administration's *de facto* policy of "hostile neglect" toward Pyongyang has been a fundamental source of the current crisis. Although North Korea's uranium-based program began well before Bush took office, the current administration bears responsibility for inciting acceleration of Korea's nuclear program and for fostering the fragile conditions under which the program's revelation quickly precipitated a complete breakdown of U.S.-North Korea relations. Unfortunately, even as Bush administration supporters now acknowledge the need for a new approach, there is still insufficient comprehension that the deficiency of Washington's posture stems as much from the "neglect" as from the "hostility."

For over a decade, U.S. domestic debate about dealing with North Korea has boiled down to *engagement* versus *confrontation*. The new Bush administration, convinced that Clinton's engagement of North Korea amounted to nothing more than bribe-paying appeasement, has essentially embraced confrontation. While eschewing any direct contacts for nearly two years, administration officials routinely characterized North Korea as an irredeemable threat to U.S. interests and emphasized that preemptive strikes and other strategic policy innovations were meant to thwart exactly the kind of proliferation that the administration expected North Korea to undertake.

However, through the 1990s, North Korea neither dependably reciprocated accommodation, as engagement advocates had hoped, nor routinely cowered in response to U.S. intimidation, as confrontation advocates had expected. Rather, the one constant of North Korean behavior has been provocation whenever it senses U.S. attention waning. Thus, while U.S. debate is dominated by *engagement* versus *confrontation*, U.S. policy success is at least as much a function of prioritizing *interaction* over *neglect*. This factor was a driving dynamic in the ebb and flow of post-1994 U.S.-North Korea relations, often undermining the Clinton administration's overarching engagement intentions. Similarly, over the past two years, the Bush administration's refusal to interact with North Korea at any level—or even to be bothered to generate a proactive policy—has served as much to precipitate Pyongyang's recent provocations as has Washington's undisguised antipathy for Kim Jong Il's regime.

The Costs of Neglect

The Bush administration's general neglect of U.S.-North Korea relations has also precipitated a grave U.S. strategic miscalculation. Bush officials probably assumed that the aggressive policy to disarm Iraq would also bolster confrontational intimidation of North Korea by implicitly signaling that, as a charter member of the "axis of evil," it could become subject to the same type



of pressure. But Kim Jong Il seems to have noticed a key point that the Bush team apparently overlooked: as long as the U.S. is preparing for a major war in the Middle East, U.S. threats to resort to the same kind of coercion of North Korea are far less credible. Kim Jong Il's government probably also concluded that only possession of a credible nuclear threat could spare North Korea from Iraq's fate. Pyongyang clearly got the message that when the Bush team was finished with Iraq, North Korea might be next, but the Koreans also realized that they had a "window of opportunity" to prepare for any future U.S. confrontation (as well as to compel eventual U.S. negotiation). Faced with exposure of his uranium program, Kim Jong Il seems to have judged that, with U.S. resources strained by the Iraq effort, North Korea must make its nuclear gambit now—it cannot afford to wait.

This strategic backdrop accounts for the Bush administration's otherwise astonishing dismissiveness of the gravity of Pyongyang's actions. In skewering North Korea on the "axis of evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address, President Bush drew a clear line in the sand: "The United States of America will not permit the world's most dangerous regimes to threaten us with the world's most destructive weapons." But less than a year later, the administration has shown itself to be both unprepared for Kim Jong Il's assertive leap across that line and unaware of its own response constraints. Preoccupied with Iraq, the Bush team has been even less remonstrative of North Korea than was the Clinton administration in the 1994 crisis: condemnation of North Korea's uranium program has been highly qualified by protestations that the situation can be handled diplomatically and has been coupled with candid admissions by unnamed high Bush officials that they are in no mood to take on a second crisis.

So palpable has been this passivity that Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld at one point felt compelled to make a vigorous public assertion of the U.S. capacity to fight simultaneous wars in the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula if necessary. Kim Jong Il hardly could have failed to perceive this statement for the hollow bluster that it was. The Bush administration's continuing intentional neglect has presented to North Korea neither sanctions to punish abrogation of its nonproliferation commitments nor incentives to embrace and expand those commitments.

Thus, predictably, North Korea has responded to the cutoff of its fuel oil supplies (stipulated under the Agreed Framework) by moving rapidly to terminate International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring at Yongbyon and to begin reprocessing the existing spent fuel (as well as restarting its 5Mw reactor at the site and recommencing construction of two newer reactors). For good measure, the regime has also threatened to resume missile testing and has declared that any UN sanctions in response to these actions would be considered "an act of war."

Meanwhile, North Korea has cleverly taken advantage of the strains that Bush administration unilateralism has created in U.S. relationships elsewhere in Northeast Asia. Even while breaking out of its nuclear straitjacket, North Korea has managed to deflect blame sufficiently to induce South Korea to offer "mediation" of the dispute—an astounding development demonstrating just how poorly Bush administration officials have appreciated the widespread erosion of South Korean support for U.S. policies in the wake of President Bush's snubbing of South Korean President Kim Dae Jung (as well as Bush's own secretary of state) just a few months after taking office.

Nor have the Bush administration's East Asian policies given China a strong incentive to pressure North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program. Although China shares the goal of keeping the Korean Peninsula nuclear-free, the Chinese leadership does not share the avowed aim of many Republicans of precipitating the collapse of Kim Jong Il's regime. Beijing's influence in Pyongyang is tangible but limited (as evidenced by North Korea's 1998 missile test, which predictably fueled U.S. missile defense aims distinctly detrimental to Chinese interests). China is unlikely to squander what influence it does have over North Korean behavior in order to back U.S. policy goals whose ultimate effects China would not welcome.

Thus, Kim Jong Il has seized the initiative in the U.S.-North Korea relationship, kicking sand in the face of the Bush administration's "hostile neglect" and virtually realizing a *fait accompli* nuclear weapons capability. The Bush administration's recently expressed willingness to talk to North Korea—but still not negotiate!—is both too little and too late; having already shifted the status quo, North Korea

may simply stage prolonged and inconclusive talks while its nuclear weapons development proceeds. U.S. negotiators reportedly now suspect that North Korea hopes to end up with both a nuclear capability and a negotiated accommodation with the United States. And other recent comments from unnamed officials that the Bush administration is resigning itself to an eventual nuclear North Korea do nothing to dissuade Pyongyang from this ambition.

Painted into a corner by its own neglect, the Bush administration now has few good options. An early military strike on the Yongbyon complex might eliminate the North Korean plutonium-based program but would risk initiating a war that would cost countless thousands of lives, devastate Seoul, potentially subject Japan to chemically armed missile attacks, and possibly trigger a broader regional conflict involving China. The Bush administration has handled its relationships with South Korea and Japan so poorly that at present it has little hope of gaining these allies' support even merely to threaten military action against North Korea.

Some analysts, rejecting military options but deeming a nuclear-armed North Korea unacceptable, advocate a "go for broke" negotiating approach aimed at forging a sweeping agreement that would not only eliminate North Korea's nuclear and missile programs but would also deeply cut North Korean conventional arms and forward deployments in exchange for U.S. assent to a peace treaty, negative security assurances such as diplomatic recognition and a non-aggression pact, and copious economic support. However, as William Perry's 1999 policy review concluded, taking this "upward path" hinges on North Korean willingness to negotiate. No sweeping agreement is possible unless North Korea is prepared to give up its nuclear program completely and to trust U.S. commitments. Given the current climate, eliciting such an attitude change is a very tall order.

A Way Forward

Any hope of gaining a negotiated termination of North Korea's nuclear programs relies, first and foremost, on the Bush administration replacing its attitude of neglect with intensive interaction. The issue is not whether to engage or confront—U.S. posture

must include *both* genuine incentives for North Korea to reach an accommodation *and* credible sanctions if it does not. In short, the U.S. needs to come up with both more carrots and a bigger stick.

Secondly, the Bush administration must be prepared to act dramatically to turn the crisis around. Even at this late date, there is one action that the U.S. could take that would give pause to Kim Jong Il's nuclear ambitions. That action would be to suspend the attack on Iraq.

Supporters of forceful action against Iraq—particularly those singularly fixated on Iraqi regime change—will howl that suspending the U.S. military threat would let Saddam off the hook, convey American weakness, and undermine any future attempts to enforce international nonproliferation agreements. Kim Jong Il, however, would know better. The Pyongyang leadership would recognize that by suspending its action against Iraq the U.S. would be bringing all its resources—including both military options and high-level leadership attention—fully to bear on North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The implicit U.S. threat to respond with force to North Korea's ratcheted nuclear escalation, or to undertake a range of preemptive actions, would immediately gain much credibility. Kim Jong Il would perceive his "window of opportunity" suddenly slammed shut.

Besides wielding this bigger stick, the Bush administration would also need to initiate the kind of thorough diplomatic engagement that most Korean experts now recommend. As U.S. actions increase Pyongyang's perceived danger in continuing its nuclear programs, U.S. words must convey equally credible willingness to compensate Pyongyang's abandonment of those programs. This approach would recognize that confrontation and engagement are not opposing choices but necessary complements in a strategy that both respects regional allies and halts North Korea's nuclear programs at this late date.

Suspending the use of military force against Iraq to focus on North Korea would certainly win support throughout the world. The move would signal adaptability and responsiveness to U.S. allies in both East Asia and Europe who perceive Bush's enthusiasm to attack Iraq as impetuous and dogmatic unilateralism.

The Bush administration would have no difficulty portraying the move as a responsible U.S. reaction to changing international circumstances—not unlike the U.S. reaction to September 11.

Prioritizing the Korean situation would particularly demonstrate to Japan and South Korea that the U.S. takes seriously the dangerous circumstances that these allies now face. Even as the U.S. prepares for potential use of force against North Korea, its commitment to full diplomatic engagement would reassure Asian allies of the U.S. desire to solve the Korean crisis short of military action, if at all possible. This reassurance is particularly crucial in easing Washington's deeply strained relationship with Seoul. With skillful diplomacy, the U.S. could parlay the relief of Russia, China, and European allies into a unified international strategy to deal with North Korea in contrast to the contentious and disjointed approach toward Iraq.

Washington would thereby gain benefits in confronting Baghdad. The Bush team could plausibly maintain that suspending military action against Iraq reflects no diminution of U.S. concern for Saddam Hussein's behavior. Advocates of giving the inspections process more time would get their wish, and the Bush administration could credibly sustain its threat to eventually disarm Iraq once the inspections process has run its course. Having given the inspections process that much more opportunity to succeed, the Bush team would also be more likely to gain the support of recalcitrant European allies, if Washington still felt that military force was necessary in Iraq.

Perhaps most importantly, suspending the near-term threat to attack Iraq in order to focus primary energies on ending North Korea's nuclear program would bring U.S. actions back into sync with reality. North Korea, with its pending diversion of sufficient plutonium to build a significant nuclear weapons arsenal and to export both materials and technology to other countries or to agents of terrorism, is today a far greater threat to U.S. security and world peace than is Iraq. This disparity was most recently underscored by the International Atomic Energy Agency's referral to the UN Security Council of North Korean "chronic noncompliance" with IAEA safeguards agreements, culminating in Pyongyang's recent disconnection of IAEA monitoring equipment and the expulsion of IAEA inspectors—in contrast to Iraq, where the IAEA was able to maintain its accounting of safeguarded nuclear materials even during the 1998-2002 suspension of formal inspections. Leaving North Korea's actions unchecked could, in the words of IAEA Director General Mohamed El Baradei, "open the door for countries to walk away from nonproliferation and arms control agreements." By shifting its primary focus from Iraq to North Korea, the U.S. would redirect international attention away from a lesser threat that is temporarily constrainable toward a greater threat that may not be.

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