

Fearful Symmetry: Washington and Pyongyang

By John Feffer | July 2003

The streets of the capital are broad and the buildings monumental. Inside the grand state offices, a power struggle rages among the political elite, and the side that seems to have the upper hand is insulated, single-minded, and shamelessly belligerent. This clique supports a military-first policy that doesn't shrink from the first use of nuclear weapons, a stance that strikes fear into allies and adversaries alike. Nor are these fears soothed by the actions or rhetoric of the leader, a former playboy who owes his position to an irregular political process and the legacy of a more statesmanlike father.

Choose your capital: Pyongyang or Washington?

In the fun house of mirrors in which contemporary global politics is enacted, a strange resemblance has developed between George W. Bush and Kim Jong Il and between their respective war parties. That North Korea is one of the poorest and most desperate countries in the world and the U.S. is the undisputed economic and military leader makes this *folie à deux* all the more poignant and ridiculous. The weaker side has exited the Non-Proliferation Treaty and is rushing to develop a nuclear deterrent; the stronger side is after nothing less than regime change. This summer Washington is confronting Pyongyang with a policy of naval interdiction and a tightening chokehold of economic isolation. North Korea is perilously close to treating these encroachments on its sovereignty as tantamount to war. Neither side trusts the other; both refuse to blink.

Such a convergence of opposites is not unheard of in international relations. During the cold war, for instance, the U.S. and the Soviet Union both indulged in a terrifying symmetry of nuclear deterrence, third world interventions, and mistaken budget priorities. But even during the darkest days, Reagan and Gorbachev displayed a personal rapport. In contrast, George W. Bush has called Kim Jong Il a "pygmy" and a "spoiled child" and has confessed to journalist Bob Woodward that he wants to topple the regime in Pyongyang regardless of the consequences. North Korea has repeatedly warned of turning Washington (or Seoul or Tokyo) into a "sea of fire." The extraordinary gap in military and economic capabilities, like a difference in electric potential, has already produced sparks that may yet lead to a conflagration.

In East Asia, the cold war is not over, and the conflict between Pyongyang and Washington, with its dance of dependency and reciprocity, threatens to spiral out of control in ways that Afghanistan and Iraq (so far) have not. War on the Korean Peninsula would be catastrophic enough. But by encouraging

Japan toward a military renaissance and pressuring South Korea to back a policy of isolating North Korea, the Bush administration is pushing all of East Asia to the brink.

Policy Shift

In the fall of 2000, when the presidency of George W. Bush was just a glint in the eye of Florida's secretary of state, the U.S. and North Korea nearly ended their 50-year war. Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang in October and found Kim Jong Il "very decisive and practical and serious." Bill Clinton was slated to meet the North Korean leader to conclude a grand deal that would have traded economic incentives and security assurances for an end to North Korea's missile programs. This deal would have built on the 1994 Agreed Framework, also negotiated by the Clinton administration, which froze the country's nuclear program in exchange for two light-water reactors, shipments of heavy fuel oil, and steps toward diplomatic normalization.

Clinton didn't go to Pyongyang, and the grand deal didn't materialize. Instead, the Bush administration took over with a determination to upend what it considered Clinton's policy of "appeasement." It was aided in this quest by a piece of intelligence inherited from its predecessor, namely that North Korea had taken out a nuclear insurance policy. Although its plutonium processing facility remained frozen, North Korea was exploring a second route to the bomb through uranium enrichment. The Bush team thus had the perfect weapon to attack U.S.-North Korean reconciliation: the perfidy of the North Koreans themselves.

But the U.S. had also backtracked on promises. It never fully lifted economic sanctions against North Korea and didn't take other steps toward the normalization of diplomatic relations suggested by the Agreed Framework. The Clinton administration persuaded Congress to accept the construction of two light-water reactors in North Korea



by arguing, quietly, that the regime in Pyongyang would not likely be around in 2003 when the reactors were supposed to go online. Instead, the regime is still around, and the reactors are only one-third complete.

Although North Korea pursued its enriched uranium program in the latter days of the Clinton administration, analysts Joel Wit and James Laney suggest that the program accelerated only when the Bush administration cranked up its hostile rhetoric—suspending diplomatic contact, criticizing Kim Dae Jung’s engagement policy, and ultimately including Pyongyang in its infamous “axis of evil.” Whatever doubts remained in Pyongyang about U.S. intentions were dispelled by the war in Iraq, which led North Korean leaders to draw three conclusions. A nonaggression agreement with the U.S. was pointless. No inspections regime would ever be good enough for Washington. And only a nuclear weapon would deter a U.S. intervention.

North Korean Threat?

This spring North Korea declared that it had acquired this ultimate deterrent. Beyond the declaration, however, the evidence is scant. Even if North Korea had enough fissionable uranium or plutonium, the material would need to be weaponized, which requires miniaturization technology that North Korean scientists do not likely possess. A CIA report recently leaked to *The New York Times* suggests that North Korea has an advanced nuclear testing site in Yongdok, but there is still no evidence that Pyongyang has yet developed any warheads to test. As for delivering such a weapon, North Korea has tested only one rocket with the potential to reach parts of Alaska—the Taepodong in 1998—and the launch fell far short in terms of both distance and accuracy. Nor does North Korea likely have the heat shield technology that would prevent its warheads from burning up on reentry from the atmosphere.

Pyongyang believes that it needs a nuclear weapon—or the much cheaper illusion of one—because its conventional forces are a mess. Though superior to the South Korean Army on the eve of the Korean War, North Korean forces have fallen on hard times. The South Korean Army spends \$163,000 per soldier for food, clothes, and armaments. North Korea spends less than one-tenth that amount. North Korea’s entire government budget is several billion dollars smaller than South Korea’s military budget alone. Underfunded and no longer aided by cheap Soviet imports, North Korean military technology is out-of-date. In a naval battle in 1999, South Korean forces easily outgunned the North Koreans. A South Korean officer told the *Korea Herald*, “You could see many North Korean

sailors exposed on the deck, because they had to handle the guns manually, while our sailors were inside watching radar screens and computer monitors.” Without fuel or spare parts, North Korean pilots are limited to thirteen hours of training missions a year. After five years of food shortages, soldiers are malnourished, and many have been rebuilding crumbling civilian infrastructure rather than training in military exercises.

Even so, Pyongyang is not entirely a paper tiger. Its stocks of short-range missiles and long-range artillery could do a great deal of damage, particularly to South Korea. To beef up this retaliatory capability, Pyongyang continues to finance its military sector, thus diverting precious funds away from stabilizing its economy. The worst of the famine that plagued the country after 1995 is over, but the North Korean economy remains fragile. And the Bush administration wants to cripple North Korea’s economy further still.

Economic Noose

It’s never been easy to get from Japan to North Korea. Most visitors have to fly to Beijing before boarding a biweekly North Korean jetliner to Pyongyang. By sea, however, several cargo ships and a weekly ferry have until recently carried people and goods between the two countries. Most of this trade has been overseen by Chosen Soren, an association of Koreans affiliated with Pyongyang but living in Japan.

In early June, nearly 2,000 Japanese government inspectors descended on the docks of Niigata, a port on the western coast of Japan, in preparation to search the incoming North Korean ferry for safety violations, infectious diseases, and immigration irregularities. Pyongyang responded by canceling the ferry run. Urged on by Washington, the Japanese authorities also detained two North Korean cargo ships as part of an effort to shut down trade relations between Chosen Soren and Pyongyang.

As summer approached, Washington and Tokyo shifted into high gear to turn the economic screws on North Korea. The military option remains on the Pentagon’s table, but Washington is also testing the possibility of toppling the regime in Pyongyang by spending it into the ground.

This economic strategy has several components. The Bush administration has cut back on food aid, arguing that monitoring should be improved and no doubt hoping that fewer high-calorie biscuits will incite children, pregnant and nursing mothers, and the elderly to rebel against the regime. There has also been an attempt to cut off the drug trafficking and arms exports that North Korea has increas-

ingly relied on, in part because Pyongyang's attempt to expand legitimate enterprises has been thwarted by the U.S. and its allies. Toward that end, in June Washington developed the "Madrid initiative" by convening another coalition of the willing to explore how to bend international law to the U.S. objective of boarding every suspicious vessel heading into and out of North Korea.

And the otherwise-multilateralism-averse Bush administration is rejecting North Korea's demand for bilateral negotiations in favor of including more countries in the discussion. This strategy serves to underscore North Korea's isolation. But the hard-liners in the administration—John Bolton in the State Department, Paul Wolfowitz in the Pentagon—are also not interested in the give-and-take of negotiations. This "just say no" faction has repeatedly rebuffed various North Korean offers, not bothering to pursue the negotiable items beneath the bluff and bluster in an effort to achieve a diplomatic solution to the escalating crisis.

Military Shell Game

In the fall and winter of 2002, hundreds of thousands of South Koreans poured into the streets to protest the acquittal of two U.S. soldiers whose vehicle struck and killed a pair of young Korean girls. Many of the protestors also wanted a reduction of the 37,000 troops stationed in South Korea, nearly half of whom are positioned as a tripwire near the demilitarized zone (DMZ) across from North Korea.

Imagine Korea's surprise when the U.S. military responded this June by announcing the withdrawal of the Second Infantry Division from the DMZ to positions south of Seoul. The protestors should have been delighted. They weren't.

Although the transformation of U.S. forces in South Korea to a more mobile rapid reaction force has been underway for several years, the withdrawal of the troops from the DMZ has been widely interpreted as pulling U.S. soldiers out of harm's way to prepare for a military strike on North Korea. The Pentagon has long been concerned with the "tyranny of proximity" that hampers its maneuverability on the Korean Peninsula.

New South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun pleaded with Washington to put off this relocation until the current nuclear crisis is resolved. He was ignored. Instead, the Bush administration threw money at the problem, offering \$11 billion to upgrade U.S. forces in South Korea over the next four years.

This latest offer is part of a joint U.S. and South Korean effort to beef up the latter's military capabilities. Seoul has set

out to acquire at least three Aegis-class destroyers and to upgrade its air force with cutting edge U.S. reconnaissance planes and F-15 fighters. At South Korea's urging, the U.S. reversed a 1979 agreement and extended the range of South Korean tactical missiles to 300 km, which brought them within striking distance of all of North Korea. For 2003, the Seoul government will spend \$14.5 billion on the military, a 6.4% increase over 2002 and the highest defense budget in its history.

South Korea is not the only country in the region to use the current crisis as a rationale for military muscle flexing. In February 2003, for the first time since World War II, a top Japanese official threatened another country with attack. Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba argued that Japan had the right to prevent a North Korean ballistic missile attack. What Ishiba failed to explain was how Japan was going to accomplish this preemptive strike. Still governed by a peace Constitution that restricts its military to a defensive posture, Japan has no offensive missiles of its own. And without an in-air refueling capacity, Japanese bombers can only make one-way trips.

All of that is changing. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and with support from Washington, Japan is shrugging off the constraints of its peace Constitution. It is aggressively pursuing missile defense, has launched its first military satellites, has promised to provide backup to any U.S. military action in the region, and is set to acquire an in-air refueling capacity to make its threats of preemptive strikes a great deal more credible. Some Japanese and U.S. politicians have even called on Tokyo to develop its own nuclear deterrent.

Disturbing Parallels

By bolstering allied forces in South Korea and encouraging Japan to flex some newfound offensive muscles, the U.S. is following through on its own military-first policy. The parallel with Pyongyang is disturbing. Until recently, North Korea pursued a strategy of *kangsong taeguk*, seeking strong economic and military power. Building up the military was important, but so too were the critical economic reforms that the government had been slowly unveiling in preparation for the big bang of lifting wage and price controls in summer 2002. In March 2003, however, Pyongyang shifted to a military-first policy in response to the current crisis.

The hard-liners in both capitals have developed a reckless codependency. The North Korean threat serves as a useful rationale for missile defense and the expansion of U.S. military influence in East Asia. And obstinate leaders in Pyongyang,

who blame U.S. policies for the problems that assail the country, now have ample ammunition for their argument that negotiations with Washington are a waste of time.

It is difficult to know what kind of opposition to this inflexible position exists in Pyongyang. In Washington, though, bipartisan support for a diplomatic solution is growing. Conservative Republican Rep. Curt Weldon visited Pyongyang in June and came back with a ten-point proposal that would start with a one-year nonaggression pact signed by Washington and Pyongyang. Within the administration, it is rumored that the relatively moderate Colin Powell and his allies in the State Department continue to push for the more traditional carrot-and-stick policies of the Clinton era. Scholars and activists are also mounting pressure from the outside.

A bipartisan consensus has formed around a revised “grand bargain” between the U.S. and North Korea that would freeze the latter’s nuclear and missile programs in exchange for political and economic incentives. According to this new consensus, promoted for instance by Selig Harrison and the Task Force on U.S. Korea Policy, North Korea would freeze both its plutonium reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities in exchange for guaranteed supplies of energy (such as natural gas from Russia), and it would freeze its missile testing program in exchange for U.S. or European launches of North Korean satellites. In addition, the U.S. would finally lift all remaining sanctions against North Korea, support North Korea’s applications to international financial institutions, and provide economic support for the rehabilitation of North Korea’s energy and extraction industries. The U.S. would also eventually “lower its military profile” on the peninsula in exchange for comparable confidence building moves by North Korea.

Considered in isolation, many of the elements of this grand bargain are certainly within reach. In October 2002, North Korea offered to shut down its nuclear program in exchange for a nonaggression pact, and it has indicated on numerous occasions that its missile program is negotiable. In 2000, North Korea made an opening bid to end its missile program in return for \$3 billion over three years, no doubt a negotiable figure. It also wouldn’t take much to remove North Korea from the State

Department’s terrorism list and to lift the remaining economic sanctions. North Korea has hinted that it would compromise on the single remaining obstacle—several Japanese Red Army hijackers holed up in North Korea for the last 30 years.

Before the current crisis broke, such a grand bargain with North Korea seemed conceivable. Other countries—South Korea, Taiwan, South Africa, Kazakhstan—have been persuaded to stop nuclear programs through diplomatic means, and the right combination of incentives no doubt could have been found for North Korea. Now, however, an Agreed Framework Plus that could provide such a magical mix of carrots seems almost chimerical owing to the twin obsessions of the principals—Washington’s push for regime change and Pyongyang’s pursuit of nuclear deterrence. We are entering a crushing new era of geopolitics. In the absence of well-enforced international laws and treaties, countries will fall back on their own mechanisms for preventing outside intervention. In geopolitics, as in geometry, parallel tracks do not meet. Until the U.S. and North Korea undo their fearful symmetry by getting serious at the negotiating table, East Asia will remain on the precipice.

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Recommended citation:

John Feffer, “Fearful Symmetry: Washington and Pyongyang,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, July 2003).

Web location:

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