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## Korea: A U.S. Foreign Policy Side Show

### *Strategic Insights*, Volume III, Issue 6 (June 2004)

by Major Dan Orcutt, USAF

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### Introduction

The pending deployment of 3,600 U.S. troops from South Korea to Iraq sends a signal about U.S. policy priorities that both North and South Korea received. Even though North Korea has been a vexing U.S. foreign policy problem since 1950, has sought to develop a nuclear capability for over forty years, and recently declared its possession of nuclear weapons, it remains in Iraq's shadow.<sup>[1]</sup>

The current nuclear crisis can trace its roots to five distinct events: President Bush's inclusion of the DPRK in the "Axis of Evil" in his 2002 State of the Union address, the new U.S. National Security Strategy, the U.S. global war on terrorism, the demise of the Agreed Framework, and North Korea's revelation of its possession of nuclear weapons. In February 2004, President Bush described the situation:

In the Pacific, North Korea has defied the world, has tested long-range ballistic missiles, admitted its possession of nuclear weapons, and now threatens to build more. Together with our partners in Asia, America is insisting that North Korea completely, verifiably, and irreversibly dismantle its nuclear programs.<sup>[2]</sup>

A typical policy debate proceeds with a claim that North Korea's latest game of brinkmanship is just another attempt to gain aid for bad behavior, and that there should be no more deals with North Korea. Opponents of taking a hard line with North Korea highlight U.S. failures to comply with portions of the 1994 Agreed Framework and to the unimaginable devastation that a second Korean War—one where both sides have nuclear weapons—could cause. While most agree on the desire for a nuclear free North Korea, no one has a simple solution.

There are four general policy options available to the United States: incentive-based diplomacy, coercive diplomacy, military force, or acceptance of a nuclear-armed North Korea. Diplomacy is the first step toward conflict resolution, and its success would eliminate the need for more aggressive policies that could lead to war, but most observers doubt a diplomatic solution is possible for such a difficult issue, given the intractable positions of both sides. In light of President Bush's February 2004 remarks, the assumption is that America will not accept a nuclear-armed North Korea. But as instability in Iraq continues to drain limited U.S. military resources, domestic patience, and international support, the Bush administration is further constrained in its policy alternatives.

## **The Epicenter of Northeast Asia**

The Korean Peninsula is the geopolitical epicenter of Asia. Five of the top fourteen economic powers and four of the ten largest armies in the world are within six hundred miles of each other. Seoul and Pyongyang are 111 nautical miles apart, separated by the most heavily armed area on the planet.<sup>[3]</sup> The Korean demilitarized zone (DMZ) divides two countries that are not at peace, but rather co-exist under a 1953 armistice that has witnessed thousands of violations and hundreds of deaths. Like other epicenters, Korea rumbles periodically: the 1968 USS Pueblo seizure, the 1994 nuclear crisis, and the DPRK's recent declaration that it possesses nuclear weapons all sent shockwaves through the region. The magnitude of the fault lines linking the United States, China, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, and Russia are enormous and span political, cultural, economic, and military categories. U.S. vital interests in the region include 500,000 citizens, 100,000 troops, and \$500 billion in annual trade.<sup>[4]</sup> Maintaining security and stability is paramount to U.S., Chinese, South Korean, and Japanese interests. However, regional stability continues to be problematic.

One example of instability in the region is North Korea's relations with Japan. Japan's brutal colonization of Korea from 1910 to 1945 left indelible marks on Korean society. North Korea's extensive methamphetamine trafficking and its acknowledgement that it kidnapped Japanese citizens for two decades heightened tension in an already troubled relationship. Pyongyang is seven hundred nautical miles from Tokyo—mere minutes of missile flight time. North Korea's proximity to Japan provides opportunity, its missiles provide a threat, and its public statements display hostile intent. North Korea's threat to turn Tokyo into a "sea of fire" caused Japanese Diet Member Shingo Nishimura to comment, "[T]here is no bigger threat than that."<sup>[5]</sup> With hundreds of missiles, including No Dong missiles with an eight hundred mile range, North Korea can strike all countries in Northeast Asia.<sup>[6]</sup> In addition, North Korea's September 1998 Taepo Dong I test demonstrated over 1,000 mile range along with multi-stage missile capability.<sup>[7]</sup> Japan showed considerable restraint following the missile test, but Northeast Asia is rumbling again following the complete breakdown of the Agreed Framework, the new U.S. National Security Policy, and North Korea's withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT).

## **U.S. Policy**

### **Assumptions**

The United States is committed to preventing Kim Jong-il from using, threatening to use, or selling nuclear weapons. In accomplishing this objective, U.S. policy options are constrained by key regional partners. For example, U.S. State Department officials refer to the three "No's" that China and the United States agreed upon with respect to common goals for North Korea: no nuclear weapons, no war, no collapse. In developing alternative strategies for resolving the current crisis, however, strategists should not rule out any policy option prior to submission for debate, selection, and approval. In addition, if the United States will not accept a nuclear-armed North Korea and diplomacy ultimately fails, how should the United States proceed? For these reasons, it is essential to consider military force. The basis for eliminating accepting North Korean nuclear weapons as a policy option are President Bush's numerous statements reflecting his desire to protect the United States from the Axis of Evil, his policy preference for action versus inaction, and his personal distaste for Kim Jong-il.<sup>[8]</sup>

### **Goals**

U.S. policy objectives for North Korean nuclear weapons include complete, verifiable, and irreversible nuclear disarmament.<sup>[9]</sup> The United States cannot permit a country with North Korea's record of state-sponsored terrorism, human rights violations, and arms sales to possess and threaten the use or sale of nuclear weapons. At the heart of any solution will be a verification

mechanism that meets the requirements of the United States, North Korea, and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, North Korea's difficulty in accepting even low levels of transparency was apparent in its April 2004 handling of the train disaster near Ryongchon. With its self-reliance ideology known as *juche*, North Korea has several reasons for remaining isolated.

Why did North Korea toil for four decades to develop nuclear weapons? Some strategists argue that in order to formulate precise policy, it is necessary to understand North Korea's motivation for building nuclear weapons. Blackmail, black-market, deterrence, or detonation is an easy memory aid to describe four potential explanations. North Korea may intend to blackmail the United States into providing security guarantees, humanitarian aid, or energy assistance by threatening to detonate or sell its nuclear weapons. North Korea's foremost policy goal is regime survival. Accordingly, the most logical explanation for its pursuit of nuclear weapons is to deter what it perceives to be a U.S. desire to overthrow its government with military force. The risk of selling or using its nuclear weapons is what spurs the United States into action.

### **Constraints**

In light of blowback from perceived U.S. unilateral action in Iraq and the vital interests of regional partners, the United States must follow a multilateral approach in its conduct of Northeast Asia policy. The United States cannot afford to alienate China while attempting to coerce North Korea. From a pragmatic standpoint, China's military and economic strength poses a significant obstacle if it disagrees with U.S. policy. In fact, China is in a position to help. China's significant leverage over North Korea stems from coal and oil exports which comprise approximately 80 percent of North Korea's energy resources.<sup>[10]</sup>

North Korea's military forces and ballistic missiles also hold major South Korean and Japanese cities at risk. Seoul's metropolitan area of over nineteen million is well within range of thousands of artillery pieces and Tokyo's metropolitan area of thirty-one million has been threatened by North Korean rhetoric (e.g., the "sea of fire" remark) and military capabilities (e.g. the 1998 Taepo Dong I missile test over Japan). South Korea's partnership with the United States has long been viewed as the center of gravity that North Korea intends to divide and the United States struggles to maintain. The January 1998 inauguration of former South Korean President Kim Dae Jung limited the policy options available to the United States. Kim's Sunshine Policy encouraged dialogue, reconciliation, and confidence building between the two Koreas. South Korea's current president, Roh Moo-hyun, met with President Bush in May 2003, and their very limited "agreement on further steps" to resolve the nuclear crisis had the roar of a butterfly. Although President Bush enjoyed an approval-rating surge for firm leadership following the attacks of 11 September 2001, he is constrained by 2004 reelection concerns and questions regarding pre-war intelligence on Iraq.

### **Policy Evaluation**

In order to compare and contrast policy options, I propose four selected criteria to measure the impact of U.S. policy choices: the impact on North Korea's nuclear weapons, the impact on North Korea's neighbors, price, and precedent.

Because U.S. policy seeks to achieve complete, verifiable, and irreversible North Korean nuclear disarmament, the first and foremost consideration is how policy impacts the status of current North Korean nuclear weapons and the country's capability to develop future nuclear weapons. This includes not only North Korea's already acknowledged plutonium production, but also its currently disavowed highly enriched uranium path to nuclear weapons. The first step is full disclosure while freezing production, followed by verification, and then ultimately dismantling any current weapons.

Since U.S. policy options will be constrained by the proximity to and strength of North Korea's neighbors, it is necessary to analyze the impact of each policy on its neighbors: China, Japan, and South Korea. Russia's relatively minimal role and limited ability to leverage North Korea's actions marginalizes its impact on the crisis.[11]

As with any U.S. policy, the president is ultimately responsible for explaining the cost of his choices to American taxpayers. Costs will not only be measured in treasure, but also in the potential loss of life. Lives will be lost most obviously in a second Korean War scenario; however, coercive diplomacy such as economic sanctions can also lead to civilian casualties. One coercive policy implementation problem in North Korea is the leadership's ability and willingness to insulate themselves from the effects of sanctions. Finally, risk analysis is a paramount consideration in policy selection. North Korea has repeatedly threatened a military response to either United Nations Security Council resolutions or economic sanctions. Furthermore, the United States cannot sit idly while North Korea develops nuclear weapons because of the high risk of resulting nuclear proliferation in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan.

How the world resolves the current North Korean nuclear crisis will affect future nuclear proliferation cases. Nuclear nonproliferation has been an objective of the United States and the United Nations since the development of nuclear weapons. On 5 March 1970, the nuclear nonproliferation treaty (NPT) codified international support for halting the spread of nuclear weapons. The NPT regime has had numerous successes such as South Africa and Ukraine, but it has no answer for non-signatory countries that have developed nuclear weapons such as India, Pakistan, and Israel. North Korea is what former Secretary of Defense William Perry referred to as, "the poster-child of proliferation problems." [12] Forced to enter the NPT in December 1985 by the Soviet Union, North Korea threatened to withdraw in March 1993. North Korea's second threat to withdraw actually became effective on 10 April 2003, after it kicked out IAEA inspectors, and was the first country to ever deny IAEA requests for special inspections.

### **Summary of Policy Analysis**

North Korea remains an enigma and the multilateral approach is both a blessing and a curse. The blessing comes from possible increased pressure on North Korea to comply with regional demands for a diplomatic solution to the nuclear crisis. The curse is in the fact that with incentives likely to fail, a multilateral coercive approach or military force in the current strategic situation has little hope of success due primarily to a lack of regional support. Herein lays the policy challenge; if North Korea cannot be enticed, coerced, or clubbed over the head, how should the United States proceed?

#### ***The Carrot: Not Tasty Enough***

The Agreed Framework was the best of only bad options available in 1994; and it failed to remove North Korea's incentive to develop nuclear weapons or to permit significant increases in transparency. A similar approach in the current situation is unlikely due to the current U.S. administration's predominant belief that North Korea cannot be trusted. Moreover, North Korea has repeatedly balked at permitting increased levels of inspections regardless of the nationality of the inspectors or the organization they represent. North Korea's refusal to accept U.S. demands for increased transparency, and the requisite inspections, is the primary reason diplomacy will most likely fail to disarm a nuclear North Korea. An incentive-based solution would be the least expensive in the long-term and has the greatest regional support. However, incentive-based diplomacy will not entice North Korea to surrender the nuclear weapons in which it has invested so heavily and views as the penultimate deterrent to U.S. military force and the source of achieving "great power status."

#### ***The Stick: Too Many Hands, Wrong Target***

With its low success rate, coercive diplomacy lacks the regional support necessary to conduct multilateral coercion successfully. In addition, coercion would affect the wrong target and has the same transparency problems as incentive-based diplomacy. North Korean leaders are hyper-insulated from an already suffering population. Virtually cut off from all economic interaction with the United States, North Korea continues to receive reliable assistance from China and bilateral trade with South Korea. Unless North Korea provokes the regional powers or increases tension with brinkmanship, it is unlikely that China and South Korea would support cutting North Korea off economically, thus limiting the United States' ability to strangle North Korea.

### ***The Sledgehammer: Potentially Effective, but Blunt and Expensive***

A second Korean War could be won by Combined Forces Command (CFC) and would provide the highest level of control over North Korean nuclear weapons; however, its costs are excessive and U.S. regional partners oppose the use of force. Seoul and Tokyo are immediately at risk to North Korean artillery and ballistic missiles, respectively. The American public does not perceive a significantly high enough threat from North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons to spend billions and endure military losses in the tens of thousands.<sup>[13]</sup> A second Korean War also implies North Korean regime change, generates several negative consequences, and risks a limited nuclear exchange.

The list of obstacles to the use of military force is long. A lack of regional support to discuss, let alone use military force, international blowback from Iraqi pre-war intelligence failures and perceived U.S. unilateral preemptive war, U.S. domestic concerns with the cost of Iraqi reconstruction, and the assured destruction of Korea's infrastructure, removes it as a feasible U.S. policy option at the present time. Moreover, Pentagon officials recently confirmed that approximately 3,600 U.S. soldiers from the second combat maneuver brigade, stationed in South Korea, will deploy to Iraq for one year. No decision has been released regarding if they will deploy with their Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles or if they will return to South Korea after serving in Iraq. This move is not as militarily significant as it is diplomatically. A credible threat of force is crucial to successful coercive diplomacy. In light of these recent events and increasing U.S. commitments in Iraq, North Korea is unlikely to believe that the United States is willing to risk simultaneous military operations in both the Middle East and Asia. To make a credible threat, the United States must still be politically and militarily ready to execute if North Korea calls the bluff.

Delays in disarming North Korea's nuclear weapons provide its leaders time to increase the stockpile. It is time for the six party talks to produce tangible results. If not, the United States needs to apply just enough stick to convince North Korean leaders that the carrots being offered are more palatable than a sledgehammer applied to the head. Presented with the examples of Libya or Iraq, which policy option would North Korea prefer? Is this a valid comparison or are the strategic situations radically different? Should coercion fail, the United States must be ready to follow through on its threat of military action to disarm North Korea of its nuclear weapons completely.

## **Policy Recommendations**

The United States successfully took the first step by achieving regional agreement for its policy objective: complete, verifiable, and irreversible North Korean nuclear disarmament. The next most important step for U.S. policymakers is to answer the second question Richard Armitage's working group asked in 1999, "What price is the United States willing to pay to disarm North Korea?"<sup>[14]</sup> If the answer to this question does not include risking a second Korean War, then the United States should not pursue coercive diplomacy. Coercive diplomacy assumes a credible threat of military force, sometimes combined with incentives, to achieve political objectives. To threaten North Korea with the use of military force, either limited strikes, or major combat operations, and then not follow through would be worse than simply accepting a nuclear North

Korea and continuing deterrence. If a second Korean War is rejected as an acceptable policy to disarm North Korean nuclear weapons and incentive based diplomacy fails, the United States should attempt to mitigate further nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia while continuing to deter North Korea from invading the South. Although inexpensive in the near term, accepting a nuclear-armed North Korea simply postpones a difficult decision that will be more costly to resolve in the future and places U.S. vital interests in Northeast Asia at an unacceptably high level of risk in the present.

Each policy option alone will fail to disarm North Korean nuclear weapons. Currently, the only politically feasible alternative is the judicious use of just enough stick to convince North Korea to take the carrots offered before the deal expires. However, time is on the side of North Korea. North Korea can work quietly while observing the recent South Korean opposition party's success in the April elections and the upcoming U.S. presidential elections in November 2004. With each passing day, allows North Korea to pursue nuclear weapons without international inspections, providing it the opportunity to build an even greater deterrent.

The United States must convince China and South Korea that disarming North Korea is a vital interest to not only the United States, but also Northeast Asia and that if not addressed soon, nuclear proliferation throughout Asia will become the world's concern. The six party talks should not continue indefinitely without tangible results. Following Vice President Cheney's April 2004 trip to Northeast Asia, Chinese leaders summoned Kim Jong-il to a meeting in Beijing that included President Jintao. The South Korean press reported that China stressed the importance of continuing the six-party talks and that Kim Jong-il should be more flexible in negotiating with the United States.<sup>[15]</sup> An allegation also circulates that China gave North Korea economic assistance for simply traveling to Beijing and publicly stating that it would continue meaningful dialogue at the six party talks. Multilateral diplomacy is the proper path, but it should be walked briskly in order to determine its chance for success without allowing North Korea unlimited time to build more nuclear weapons.

Regardless of the outcome of the November 2004 Presidential election, the next administration should decide if it wants to shift from talks to coercion. It is vital that this critical foreign policy decision be thoroughly vetted with a wide range of experts, inputs, and policy options, including a review of the Perry Report and Armitage recommendations. Aggressive U.S. policy in Northeast Asia could easily escalate to a second Korean War; accordingly, it is necessary to measure both Congressional and public support. If Congress and the American people believe North Korean nuclear weapons are a threat to U.S. vital interests, then they need to realize the policy's potential costs. Whatever the policy debate outcome, a clear and credible policy should be ready for implementation immediately following the Presidential election, since delays favor North Korea. If the decision is to pursue coercive diplomacy, the next step is to reaffirm precisely what to demand of North Korea.

Due to consensus with regional partners, it is likely the United States will continue to demand North Korea's complete, verifiable, and irreversible nuclear disarmament, and not publicly advocate North Korean regime change. The next step would be to develop and communicate a credible threat based upon realistic military capabilities within the constraints of very limited regional support. For example, in order to conduct operations from Japan in preparation for limited South Korean support it is necessary to draft contingency plans. Actual force deployments into the region, similar to Pacific Theater buildups prior to operations in Iraq to deter North Korean opportunistic aggression, must back the threat of military force. However, the timing and extent of force buildup requires careful planning and execution. Operations in Iraq placed a tremendous strain on U.S. forces, military logistics, and public support. Likewise, increasing troop strength in the Korean Theater heightens tension not only with North Korea, but also South Korea, China, and to some extent Japan. However, if properly executed, these buildups could accomplish three objectives. First, they would support the coercive threat. Second, they would be better prepared to conduct operations either to demonstrate U.S. resolve or to counter North Korean aggression.

Finally, their redeployment out of the theater becomes bargaining chips for U.S. policymakers negotiating with North Korean leaders.

In communicating the threat of military action to North Korea, the United States should invite as many senior North Korean leaders as possible to review U.S. capabilities in South Korea and force demonstrations in the United States. The purpose of these displays would be to demonstrate clearly that the threat of U.S. military force is credible. Furthermore, that U.S. forces employed on the Korean peninsula would be overwhelming, lethal, precise, and victorious. The format for these military demonstrations could be similar to Air Power Demonstrations previously conducted near Nellis Air Force Base, Nevada for high-ranking U.S. leaders such as members of Congress and all new flag rank officers in the U.S. military.

After communicating a credible threat, the United States should offer incentives that allay North Korea's fears and meet its dire energy and food needs. Providing incentives, that some refer to as an "exit ramp," allows Kim Jong-il a face-saving way out of his nuclear dilemma. This is especially important when dealing with an insecure leader of a failed state who aspires to be a "great power," especially when Korean culture places great emphasis on pride. Although President Bush has stated he will not permit America to be blackmailed, when faced with either a second Korean War or accepting a nuclear North Korea, providing incentives may appear easier to swallow when offered after the threat of force. Future incentive decisions should consider the pros and cons of continuing construction of the 1994 Agreed Framework's two light water reactors or scrapping these programs for alternative energy sources. Since North Korea objected to South Korean workers being permitted inside North Korea to build the light water reactors, China could potentially assist North Korea in rebuilding its electrical infrastructure or an alternative energy source using South Korean and Japanese funding. Finally, the United States must determine a deadline for North Korea's compliance and be militarily and politically prepared to execute its declared threat.

U.S. policy will need to be "sold" both internationally and domestically. Absent a significant threat, the average American largely ignores U.S. foreign policy. The war in Iraq increased concern over intelligence accuracy and the viability of preemptive wars in pursuit of the "Axis of Evil." United Nations support for either coercion or military force to disarm North Korea will be more difficult to sell than the failed attempt to rally support for the Iraq War. A Chinese veto of any proposed resolutions condemning North Korea or a call for an aggressive policy that it does not support is almost a certainty. Domestically, building support for a potential second Korean war would be difficult at best. The average American has little interest in foreign policy and does not perceive North Korea as a threat to Homeland Security. If a North Korean nuclear weapon sold to Al Qaeda and detonated at the Superbowl had Kim Jong-il's fingerprints on it, America would mobilize. Short of that, many Americans wonder why the United States should risk killing tens of thousands of people to remove a threat that young South Koreans fail to perceive. It is necessary to use credible evidence of North Korea's record of illicit activities and human rights violations to inform the American people and the international community of the repressive nature of Kim Jong-il's regime. Although Iraqi pre-war intelligence tarnished the United States' reputation, it must pursue international and domestic support by convincing people that North Korea does, in fact, have nuclear weapons and that this is unacceptable.

If both incentive and coercive diplomacy fail to disarm North Korean nuclear weapons, the steps taken during coercive diplomacy will better position the United States to conduct military operations at the time and place of its choosing to disarm North Korea. Ideally, this would occur with at least South Korea's tacit support and China's promise to remain neutral. However, military planners should prepare for the worst, and have contingency plans that assume no offensive operations from South Korea and that China may provide North Korea assistance short of employing military force. Among the myriad of considerations, strategists should avoid creating situations that are likely to trigger North Korean employment of nuclear weapons. In addition, they should attempt to convince senior North Korean military leaders that the outcome of war is not the



question, but rather how much destruction they wish to endure. Psychological operations always play a role in military conflict, but the potential impact of exposing Kim Jong-il's leadership failures, repressive actions, and economic incompetence could convince North Korean military leaders that the Libyan model is a better alternative than Iraq.

## Summary

The two alternatives available if diplomacy fails are both unattractive. However, the United States should not shy away from protecting its vital interests because a potentially effective policy is costly. If after being informed of the potential costs of military force, Congress and the American people still support the U.S. objective of complete, verifiable, and irreversible North Korean nuclear disarmament, the United States should act immediately. In addition, U.S. diplomats should make every effort to convince our regional partners that the benefits of supporting U.S. and regional policy goals outweigh the costs of opposing them. At the end of the day, however, U.S. leaders are likely to conclude that containing a nuclear-armed North Korea is better than a second Korean War. Of course, policy makers want to avoid having to present the President with this stark choice. But if diplomacy fails to disarm a nuclear North Korea, advisers must be clear which of the two choices is preferable. Instead of providing the perfect template by which to coerce North Korea, U.S. policy in Iraq may have not only cast a shadow on the Korean policy side show, but blocked out the sun entirely. Hopefully, when the light shines again inside North Korea, the United States is not forced by an increased nuclear weapon status quo into a policy of containment.

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Air Force Major Dan Orcutt will graduate with a Master's in National Security Affairs from the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School in September 2004. His master's thesis weighs U.S. policy options to resolve the North Korean nuclear crisis.

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