



# BACKGROUND

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## Managing North Korea's Predictable Brinksmanship

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North Korea's communist regime is preparing to launch a "communications satellite" that many fear is a cover for a ballistic missile test. The act has been rightly condemned around the world. But we must not allow this gambit for attention to sidetrack our broader policy toward North Korea. Our core objective must remain the cessation of North Korea's nuclear proliferation and development. That is the real threat to international peace and security, not another missile test.

### North Korea: World's Worst Regime

North Korea is arguably the most morally repugnant regime on earth. It spends lavishly on its military, while millions of its people starve. The Congressional Research Service claims that it maintains a close relationship with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and has provided arms and training to Hezbollah and the Tamil Tigers. For more than a decade, the North Korean government counterfeited tens of millions of U.S. dollars. North Korean nuclear and missile technology has found its way into countries such as Pakistan, Libya, Iran, Syria, and Egypt. The regime has kidnapped foreign nationals, threatened its neighbors with missile tests, and detonated a nuclear device. Clearly, the array of threats posed by North Korea is wide.<sup>1</sup>

Yet two primary threats to U.S. national security stand out above the rest, and ought to determine U.S. policy objectives toward North Korea.

*"We must not let the upcoming missile launch induce the United States to take its eyes off the prize: ending North Korea's nuclear program and preventing war on the Korean Peninsula."*

### **Objective #1: Curbing North Korea's Production of Nuclear Weapons and Sale of Nuclear Technology.**

The greatest danger North Korea poses to the United States is not a missile launch: it is North Korea's willingness to sell nuclear technology to the highest bidder. North Korea is highly unlikely to direct a hostile nuclear missile at the U.S. or an ally.<sup>2</sup> It has nothing to gain and everything to lose by doing so. However, with its economy on the brink of collapse, North Korea has a strong incentive to treat its nuclear technology as a cash crop. It has already proliferated to hostile countries, and could potentially sell to terrorist groups. That is why we must not allow a single missile test – which poses little threat in and of itself – to divert our attention from the urgent need to check North Korea's nuclear ambitions and black marketeering.

### **Objective #2: Preventing War on the Korean Peninsula and Keeping North Korea's Military At Bay.**

North Korea has a highly trained military that is positioned to launch a conventional attack against South Korea. Estimates suggest that North Korean aircraft can reach Seoul, the South's capital, in less than ten minutes.<sup>3</sup> Since the 1950s,

*The Truman Doctrine*

the United States has maintained tens of thousands of troops in South Korea – approximately 30,000 remain there today – to make sure that does not happen.<sup>4</sup> While the United States would emerge triumphant from a military campaign against North Korea, the cost of such a conflict could be staggering. As early as the mid-1990s, U.S. officials estimated that a full-scale conventional war on the Korean Peninsula would cause up to one million casualties and as much as one trillion dollars in economic damages—beyond the initial cost for the United States of \$100 billion. American forces in Northeast Asia could suffer anywhere between 80,000-100,000 fatalities.<sup>5</sup> South Korea is an ally, and we should not abandon them, which means war on the Korean Peninsula must be avoided.

*North Korea “has shut down three core facilities at Yongbyon and has completed eight of the eleven [nuclear] disablement steps.”*  
*- Dennis Blair, Director of National Intelligence, 2009*

### Meeting our Objectives in North Korea: Two Approaches

For far too long, North Korea policy has been dominated by posturing, with politicians opting for tough talk over tough choices. To achieve the objectives at hand, the U.S. must create a comprehensive approach to the North Korean threat and firmly choose between two approaches. Neither approach is good, but one is clearly worse. Recent history shows why this is the case.

***Approach #1: Rhetoric and Coercion.*** Inflammatory rhetoric played a major role in the Bush administration’s early policy toward North Korea. The impulse is understandable, but the effect is underwhelming. North Korea deserves moral condemnation, but airing rhetorical grievances does nothing to change the regime’s behavior. George W. Bush famously branded North Korea as part of an “Axis of Evil” in January 2002, without any palpable effect on North Korean actions.

When words failed to change the status quo, the Bush administration added a series of punitive measures. It imposed sanctions on several North Korean organizations, abrogated the 1994 Agreed Framework in which North Korea had agreed to halt its plutonium program in return for U.S. energy assistance, and ceased delivery of fuel aid to North Ko-

rea. North Korea responded by restarting its nuclear program, testing ballistic missiles, detonating a nuclear device, and producing enough new plutonium to create six nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup>

Defenders of this approach argue that harsher punitive actions are necessary. They also insist that regional powers such as China must do more to pressure the North Korean regime. Either the pressure will force North Korea to change course, or it will lead to the collapse of the regime and allow a better government to come to power. This view, however, is flawed.

First, the U.S. has very little leverage over North Korea. Commercial relations are virtually nonexistent, so we cannot deliver effective economic sanctions.<sup>7</sup> A freeze in the delivery of fuel aid is counterproductive, because North Korea will sell nuclear technology and use the cash to buy fuel elsewhere. Nor can we expect a cessation of food aid to change the regime’s behavior, as it would sooner see its population starve than submit itself to coercion.

Second, China, which does have leverage, will never allow North Korea to collapse.<sup>8</sup> A failed state would precipitate a major refugee crisis, setting the stage for massive economic and political dislocation in the region. The Chinese see North Korea’s nuclear program as bad, but a collapsed state as worse. They fear that sanctions or other methods of coercion would either topple the North Korean regime or prompt it to lash out and start a real conflict. South Korea and Russia have shown similar concerns by voicing opposition to sanctions and military action. Since China will do whatever it can to make sure this does not happen – and South Korea and Russia might behave in a similar manner – we should not expect the nations of Northeast Asia to turn up heat on Pyongyang.

As foreign policy scholar Les Gelb writes in his new book, *Power Rules*: “the central paradox of twenty-first century world affairs [is that] the United States is probably the most powerful nation in history, yet far more often than not, it can’t get it’s way.”<sup>9</sup> The U.S. has the power to lead, but we must be realistic about the power we can leverage. On the Korean Peninsula, unless we want to bear the immense casualties and costs of a conventional war, we do not have the power to make the North Korean regime collapse against the will of its neighbors. ***Put simply, a policy based on rhetoric and coercion is destined to fail.***

***Approach #2: Managing North Korea's Predictable Brinkmanship.*** As erratic as North Korea seems, its behavior is remarkably predictable. When it wants international attention, it takes provocative action, and then backs down after winning a small concession. Conceding anything to this abominable, dangerous regime is less than ideal. Yet as long as concessions are minor, this remains the least bad course of action so long as it allows us to avert war on the Korean Peninsula and prevent North Korea from selling nuclear technology. Given the choice between a thorn in our side and a gun to our head, the former is preferable.

***This approach – giving North Korea small carrots in return for a freeze on its nuclear activities – has a history of success.*** When North Korea threatened to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and came close to starting a war in 1994, the Clinton administration responded by engaging North Korea through the Agreed Framework. Not only did this avert a war that could have claimed the lives of hundreds of thousands, it convinced North Korea to put a freeze on its plutonium production for nine years. ***This is no small feat, as North Korea could have produced enough plutonium during that time period to develop as many as one hundred nuclear bombs.***<sup>10</sup> The regime continued to engage in illicit and illegal activities, but the more critical task of halting its nuclear capabilities was achieved.

This accomplishment was all the more impressive as Congressional Republicans bent over backwards to oppose the deal. They believed that the North Korean regime was on the brink of collapse, and no less a figure than Senator John McCain accused the Clinton administration of “appeasement.” As a result of this opposition, Congress blocked funding for many of the promises the United States made under the Agreed Framework, which gave North Korea a pretext for skirting its commitments.<sup>11</sup>

After espousing a similar point of view, the Bush administration admirably changed course on North Korea after its early efforts met with failure. Under the auspices of the Six Party Talks – including the United States, North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia – North Korea agreed to dismantle its key nuclear facility at Yongbyon in return for economic and political incentives. Although the agreement has been troubled by prevarications on all sides, most of the promised aid has been delivered to North Korea, while North Korea has fulfilled eight

out of eleven obligations related to nuclear disablement.<sup>12</sup> Concerns about North Korean intentions – especially those regarding its suspected uranium program – will not disappear anytime soon, but through concerted effort, President Clinton and President Bush showed that progress is possible.

## Conclusion

Of course, if North Korea launches a missile that appears to be headed toward American air space we should mobilize our missile defense systems to shoot it down. Otherwise, our best bet is to call North Korea's bluff and condemn the launch if it goes through. Pyongyang has a long history of issuing threats and rattling sabers. They are usually more bark than bite, and the “communications satellite” is no different. What North Korea wants is attention. We must not let the upcoming missile launch induce the United States to take its eyes off the prize: ending North Korea's nuclear program and preventing war on the Korean Peninsula. History shows that when we leverage the support of regional powers and engage North Korea directly, we are able to persuade Kim Jong-Il to keep his nuclear brinkmanship at bay. No doubt, the provision of even the smallest of carrots to such a noxious regime lacks the visceral satisfaction of righteous rhetoric. Yet what it lacks in emotional content is surely made up for by proven success.

End Notes 1.) For reading on North Korea's many illicit activities: Nikitin, “North Korea's Nuclear Program,” *CRS Report*, 22 February 2009; Niksch, “North Korea: Terrorism List Removal?” *CRS Report*, 2 February 2009; Arms Control Association, “Arms Control and Proliferation Profile: North Korea,” January 2008; Perl and Nanto, “North Korean Counterfeiting of U.S. Currency,” *CRS Report*, 22 March 2006; 2.) Blair, “Annual Threat Assessment of the Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence,” 12 February 2009; 3.) International Institute for Strategic Studies, “The Conventional Military Balance on the Korean Peninsula,” 2006; Kristoff, “Face-Off: North Korea Wouldn't Invade the South, Would It?” *New York Times*, 14 April 1996; 4.) Bruner, “U.S. Military Dispositions: Fact Sheet,” January 2007; 5.) Becker, *Rogue Regime: Kim Jong-Il and the Looming Threat of North Korea*, Oxford (2005), pg. 166; 6.) Arms Control Association, “Chronology of U.S.-North Korean Nuclear and Missile Diplomacy,” June 2008; Nikitin, *Ibid.*; 7.) Nanto and Chanlett-Avery, “The North Korean Economy: Leverage and Policy Analysis,” *CRS Report*, 26 August 2008; 8.) Nanto and Chanlett-Avery, *Ibid.*; Shambaugh, “China and the Korean Peninsula: Playing for the long term,” in *Reshaping Rogue States: A Washington Quarterly Reader*, Lennon and Eiss, editors, MIT Press (2004). 9.) Gelb, *Power Rules*, New York: Harper (2009) 10.) Stossel, “North Korea: The War Game,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2005; 11.) Sigal, “North Korea: Negotiations Work,” *MIT Center for International Studies: The Audit of Conventional Wisdom*, February 2007; Stossel, *Ibid.*; 12.) Manyin and Mary Beth Nikitin, “Assistance to North Korea,” *CRS Report*, 24 December 2008; Department of State, *Report on Verification Measures Related to North Korea's Nuclear Programs*, 2008 (Published in *Arms Control Today*, October 2008).

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