

Strategic Insight

Countdown in Korea

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North Korea's surprise admission last October to a secret nuclear weapons program based on uranium enrichment triggered a cascading breakdown of the 1994 Agreed Framework structure that had kept North Korea's more advanced plutonium-based nuclear program in check. By year's end North Korea had expelled United Nations inspectors and removed monitoring equipment at its Yongbyon nuclear complex, announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, and begun preparations to restart its plutonium reprocessing facility. This twin proliferation danger surpasses even the apex of the 1993-4 North Korean crisis that nearly triggered a U.S. military attack.

The Bush administration's *de facto* policy of "hostile neglect" toward North Korea has contributed to this crisis. Although North Korea's uranium-based program began well before the Bush team took office, the administration bears some responsibility for inciting acceleration of this 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 administration supporters have acknowledged the need for a new approach, there remains insufficient appreciation that the deficiency of the current administration's posture has been as much "neglect" as "hostility."

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

However, through the 1990s, North Korea neither dependably reciprocated accommodation, as engagement advocates would hope, nor routinely cowered to U.S. intimidation, as confrontation advocates would expect. Rather, the one constant of North Korean behavior has been provocation whenever it sensed U.S. attention waning. Thus, while U.S. debate is dominated by *engagement* versus *confrontation*, U.S. policy success actually has been more a function of prioritizing *interaction* over *neglect*. This factor was a driving dynamic in the ebb and flow of post-1994 U.S.-North Korean 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 has been as much a precipitant of Pyongyang's recent provocations as the Bush team's undisguised antipathy for Kim Jong-il's regime.

Against this backdrop, the Bush administration's response to the "October surprise" was remarkably passive: condemnation of the uranium program was highly qualified by protestations that the situation could be handled diplomatically. Administration supporters defended this cautiousness as pragmatic and sensible in light of the tremendous vulnerability of South Korea should the crisis escalate to war. Yet the Bush team's reactions have been even more passive than those of the Clinton administration in the 1994 crisis, despite the equivalent conventional threat North Korea then posed as well. Moreover, this current cautiousness exposes the limitations of the administration's prior confrontational posture and inflammatory rhetoric. Against this backdrop, the administration appeared unprepared for Kim Jong-il's assertive reaction to U.S. exposure of the uranium program.

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In fact, the real source of the administration's passive response to the emerging North Korean nuclear crisis was its preoccupation with Iraq. Having spent the previous summer heating up this confrontation, and riding the crest of a Congressional vote of support and Bush's September 12 gauntlet-throwing U.N. speech, the administration had no interest in reversing its general neglect of U.S.-North Korea relations. This posture precipitated a potentially serious 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. Kim Jong-il seems to have gotten this message, but also to have noticed that with the U.S. preparing for a major war in the Middle East, U.S. threats to resort to the same kind of coercion of North Korea *simultaneously* were far less credible. Kim Jong-il's government clearly also concluded that, despite its credible threat of conventional retaliation against South Korea, only possession of a credible nuclear threat could spare North Korea from Iraq's fate. In short, Pyongyang realized that it had a "window of opportunity" to prepare for any future U.S. confrontation (as well as compel eventual U.S. negotiation).

The greatest danger was (and is) that North Korea will reprocess the spent nuclear fuel stored at the Yongbyon site. Reprocessing could within a few months provide North Korea with sufficient plutonium for a half dozen nuclear weapons, a considerable increase over the one or two weapons worth of fissile material the regime has long been suspected to possess. 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 whoever comes up with the cash.

Exposure of the North Korean uranium program presented Kim Jong-il with a choice: no longer could North Korea publicly reach out to the United States while privately hedging. Kim seems to have judged that, with U.S. resources strained by the Iraq effort, North Korea could afford to make its nuclear gambit overt—and could not afford to wait.

This reasoning accounts for Pyongyang's decision, during the now infamous October visit by James Kelley, to acknowledge—even flaunt—its uranium program. North Korea called the U.S. bluff. The Bush team appeared unprepared for the constraints its Iraq policy placed on its capacity to respond to this provocation, as unnamed high Bush officials candidly admitted that they were in no mood to take on a second crisis. Yet, the administration also continued to rule out "Clinton-style" direct negotiations with North Korea. Thus, the Bush administration presented to North Korea neither sanctions to punish its abrogation of its nonproliferation commitments nor new incentives to embrace and expand those commitments. By defaulting to its preexisting policy of intentional hostile neglect, the Bush team allowed North Korea to throw off the only constraints preventing it from reprocessing the spent fuel at Yongbyon.

The strategic miscalculation allowing North Korea this "window of opportunity" to pursue its nuclear program unfettered could have allowed North Korea to realize a *fait accompli* nuclear weapons capability well beyond what it may already possess. In this regard, the Bush administration now appears to have dodged a bullet. The Iraq war did not turn out to be the long urban guerilla war some feared, already freeing up many U.S. military assets as well as the administration's attention. Meanwhile, public reports

indicate that North Korea has not yet commenced (or has been unable to commence) plutonium reprocessing. North Korea's brief window of opportunity of U.S. preoccupation in Iraq is now closing.

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However, even without having begun reprocessing, North Korea's escape from the constraints of its nuclear program that the Agreed Framework ensured marks a significant shift in the status quo. North Korea may now simply stage prolonged and inconclusive diplomatic tit-for-tat—with or without face-to-face talks—while its nuclear weapons development proceeds. U.S. officials reportedly now suspect that North Korea hopes to end up with both a nuclear capability and a negotiated accommodation with the United States.

The Bush administration now has few good options. An early military strike on the Yongbyon complex might eliminate the North Korean plutonium reprocessing capacity, but at the risk of inciting a North Korean counter-attack that could cost tens or hundreds of thousands of lives, devastate Seoul, potentially subject Japan to chemically-armed missile attacks, and possibly trigger a broader regional conflict involving China. A few astute analysts have observed that such a North Korean response is not inevitable; indeed, if the Pyongyang leadership did not interpret a single strike on Yongbyon as auguring a broader U.S. assault on the regime, it would have a powerful incentive not to escalate the conflict. However, such restraint from Pyongyang is far from assured; a U.S. strike on Yongbyon would be a clear gamble with very high stakes.

The administration may hope that intensive coercive pressure will be enough to restrain North Korea from crossing the reprocessing "red line." This seems, at any rate, to be the main current strategy. Thus, administration supporters trumpeted North Korea's agreement to join three-way talks in Beijing in April as vindication of the administration's refusal to meet with North Korea bilaterally. Of course, that was before North Korea angered U.S. negotiators by describing Chinese participation as mere "mediation," announced on the eve of the meetings that it was prepared to begin reprocessing, and boasted at the meetings that it already possessed nuclear weapons. The fitful results so incensed administration hard-liners that prospects for further talks may be dimmer now than before. But long-time watchers of North Korea were not surprised. The episode was a microcosm of the past decade-plus of U.S.-North Korean relations—a history in which successful U.S. coercion of North Korea is hardly in evidence.

Some analysts 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 also deeply cut North Korean conventional arms and forward deployments, in exchange for U.S. assent to a peace treaty, diplomatic recognition, negative security assurances, and copious economic support. However, intransigence on both sides militates against successfully achieving such a negotiated breakthrough. As William Perry's 1999 policy review concluded, taking such an "upward path" hinges on North Korean willingness to negotiate genuinely. Yet Pyongyang today is probably as unprepared as it has ever been to trust U.S. commitments and give up its nuclear program completely. Meanwhile, for its part, the Bush administration refuses to even discuss security assurances or economic assistance until North Korea's nuclear program is ended.

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

The Bush administration now seems ready to pick up the confrontational side of this engagement, moving heavy bombers to Guam and other military assets to South Korea. With the Iraq war now past, the

administration is beginning to get more support from Japan and South Korea, which in turn adds credibility to the implicit threat of these military deployments.

However, the Bush administration must also take seriously the alternative of meaningful negotiations. It must array U.S. coercive options with the goal to induce, not substitute for, fulsome diplomatic engagement. As U.S. actions increase Pyongyang's perceived danger in continuing its nuclear programs, U.S. words must convey equally credible willingness to accommodate Pyongyang's abandonment of those programs. Such a U.S. approach would recognize that confrontation and engagement are not opposing choices but necessary complements of any strategy that aspires to successfully and peacefully halt North Korea's nuclear programs at this late date.

A genuine U.S. willingness to negotiate as well as confront would particularly demonstrate to Japan and South Korea that the U.S. takes seriously the dangerous circumstances these allies now face. A U.S. commitment to full diplomatic engagement of North Korea, coupled with genuine collaboration with North Korea's neighbors, would reassure these allies of the U.S. desire to solve the Korean crisis peacefully, if at all possible. This reassurance would be particularly crucial in easing Washington's strained relationship with Seoul. With skillful diplomacy, the United States could parlay the support of Russia, China, and European allies into the kind of unified international course of action to deal with North Korea that was conspicuous in its absence with respect to Iraq.

The passing of the Iraq war now allows the United States to focus on the North Korean nuclear crisis—a crisis many believe has posed a more serious threat to U.S. interests and global security than Iraq ever did. This disparity was underscored earlier this year by the IAEA's referral to the UN Security Council of North Korean "chronic noncompliance" with its IAEA safeguards agreements—in contrast to Iraq, where the IAEA was able to maintain its accounting of safeguarded nuclear materials even during the 1998-2002 suspension of inspections and subsequently found no evidence of a revived nuclear program. 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."

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." However, while preoccupied with Iraq, the Bush administration has allowed North Korea to do exactly that. No doubt the North Korean crisis is also much more difficult than the Iraqi problem to solve—especially because, unlike Iraq, the situation does not lend itself to a forced solution. If the administration truly wants to avoid leaving itself with only a choice between a nuclear-armed North Korea and a military attack, it will need to find a way to initiate genuine negotiations—while keeping the military options ready enough to compel North Korea to take the negotiations seriously as well. In short, the Bush team will have to find a way to do the thing that is hardest for it to do: sit down and talk.

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