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Options for Dealing with North Korea

by Ted Galen Carpenter

Executive Summary

North Korea's recent actions in violation of the clear intent of the agreement it signed in 1994 to freeze its nuclear program have ignited a crisis in northeast Asia. Unfortunately, all of the frequently discussed options for dealing with this crisis have major drawbacks.

One option would be to pursue the same strategy embodied in the 1994 agreement: bribe North Korea to give up its nuclear ambitions. Given the failure of bribery in the past, however, there is little reason to assume that sweetening the bribe would induce Pyongyang to honor the commitments that it is already violating. A new round of cheating would be likely.

A second option would be to launch preemptive military strikes against North Korea's nuclear installations. But such a strategy would be profoundly dangerous. Military coercion could trigger a general war on the Korean peninsula. Indeed, if U.S. and Chinese intelligence sources are correct, North Korea may already possess a small number of nuclear weapons, which would make a U.S. preemptive strike especially risky.

A third option is to pressure North Korea

to honor its commitments by imposing new economic sanctions. Since North Korea is already one of the most economically isolated countries in the world, however, sanctions are unlikely to dissuade Pyongyang from pursuing a nuclear weapons program.

Washington should consider another approach. It should inform North Korea that, unless it abandons its nuclear program, the United States will encourage South Korea and Japan to make their own decisions about also going nuclear. That prospect might well cause the North to reconsider and keep the region nonnuclear. Even if it does not do so, a nuclear balance of power in northeast Asia might emerge instead of a North Korean nuclear monopoly.

The crisis illustrates the folly of Washington's insistence on maintaining a military presence in East Asia. In a normal international system, North Korea's neighbors—South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia—would have to worry the most about Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions and would take the lead in formulating policies to deal with them.

*Ted Galen Carpenter is vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute and the author or editor of 14 books on international affairs, including *Peace & Freedom: Foreign Policy for a Constitutional Republic*.*

The 1994 framework agreement was a gamble from the outset.

Introduction

North Korea's admission in October 2002 that it has been pursuing a uranium enrichment program sent shock waves throughout the American foreign policy community. Such a program violates several agreements that North Korea has signed over the years. It is contrary to Pyongyang's obligations as a signatory to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, since no international inspections of the program were conducted to ensure that the uranium was not being diverted to a nuclear weapons development effort. The enrichment program violates provisions of the 1991 accord that Pyongyang signed with South Korea making the entire Korean peninsula a nuclear free zone. And the program violates the clear intent of the 1994 framework agreement in which North Korea agreed to freeze its (illicit) nuclear weapons program in exchange for certain benefits that the United States, Japan, and South Korea promised to provide.

Concern about North Korea's nuclear activities has deepened with Pyongyang's announcement in mid-December that it was restarting work at three reactors, including the plutonium-producing reactor at Yongbyon, 60 miles north of the capital.¹ That reactor was mothballed as part of the 1994 framework agreement. The uranium enrichment program violates the intent of the 1994 agreement, but reactivating the Yongbyon facility is a violation of explicit provisions of the agreement. If North Korea reopens the reactor, it could soon be capable of producing enough plutonium each year for more than a dozen bombs.

There is widespread and justifiable anger at Pyongyang's repeated perfidy, but anger does nothing to address the problem of what to do now. Unfortunately, none of the available options is especially desirable.

Option 1: Bribe Pyongyang Again

One option is to attempt to salvage the 1994 framework agreement and try to get

North Korea to make a new commitment to renounce nuclear weapons. Several former officials of the Clinton administration advocate that course, proposing a new round of negotiations.² Some prominent scholars of East Asia also suggest such a strategy.³

There are various problems with that approach, however. North Korea signed an array of solemn agreements to renounce a nuclear weapons capability, yet it has systematically violated those agreements. In the 1994 agreement, for example, Pyongyang promised to freeze its (already illicit) nuclear program and received significant inducements to do so. Those rewards included a commitment by the United States and its allies to ship fuel oil to North Korea and to build "proliferation resistant" light-water reactors in the country to offset the power generation losses the North suffered by relinquishing its supposedly peaceful nuclear power program.⁴

True, the United States and its allies have fallen behind schedule in building the light-water reactors, and Washington has been even slower to implement other provisions aimed at creating a less hostile U.S.-North Korean relationship.⁵ Nevertheless, there was no justification for North Korea's pursuing a secret uranium enrichment program, much less restarting work on its existing reactors. It should also be noted that Pyongyang did not disclose the uranium program until Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly confronted North Korean officials with evidence of its existence from U.S. intelligence agencies.

The 1994 framework agreement was a gamble from the outset. In essence the Clinton administration adopted a strategy of bribing North Korea to end its violations of previous agreements to renounce nuclear weapons. On balance, it was probably a gamble worth taking, especially since the alternatives appeared to be to watch helplessly as Pyongyang built a sizable nuclear arsenal or to launch military strikes to take out the Yongbyon reactor and other installations—with all the horrid risks that such a course would entail. An agreement to freeze the North's program offered tangible benefits, albeit by setting the dubious precedent of

bribing a would-be nuclear proliferator. The framework agreement also bought time. Clinton administration officials and other proponents of the agreement apparently hoped that, as the years passed, the North Korean regime would either collapse or transform itself into something other than an aggressive, totalitarian dictatorship.

Actual developments have not matched those hopes. There have been signs over the past two years or so that North Korea is moderating its hostility toward South Korea, Japan, and the United States and that it is beginning to open up to the outside world economically. Nevertheless, North Korea is still governed by a secretive, ruthless, and unpredictable totalitarian system. And with the revelation of the uranium enrichment program, we have yet another violation of North Korea's promises to not pursue the goal of developing nuclear weapons. Proponents of trying to salvage the 1994 framework agreement speculate that Pyongyang may be using the threat of nuclear programs merely as a bargaining ploy to wring more concessions out of the United States and its allies. That may be Pyongyang's motive. But it is also possible that North Korea is intent on becoming a nuclear weapons state, in the belief that such a capability will give it significant international prestige and geopolitical clout. At the very least, that is a possibility that cannot be ignored given the North's long track record of violating agreements it has signed regarding nuclear matters.

Giving Pyongyang additional rewards in the hope that it will live up to agreements it has already violated would, therefore, seem to be a rather naive strategy. Americans who recommend such a course should remember the old adage: "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."

Option 2: Preemptive War

The second option is the opposite of the first. Instead of trying to salvage the framework agreement by making additional concessions to North Korea, the United States would threaten military action if Pyongyang does not immediately aban-

don its nuclear program and turn over any weapons it has produced. Indeed, if one takes seriously the "preemptive action" and "proactive counterproliferation" provisions of the new national security strategy the Bush administration promulgated in September, Washington should already be threatening Pyongyang with dire consequences.⁶ After all, the United States is prepared to go to war against Iraq because of the mere possibility that Iraq might someday do what North Korea has already done.⁷

But there are compelling reasons for not threatening North Korea. Even the most hawkish foreign policy experts seem to realize that adopting that course could easily engulf the Korean peninsula in a major war. Indeed, it could be a war with nuclear implications. U.S. intelligence sources believe that Pyongyang may already have built one or two nuclear weapons by the time it agreed to freeze its program. The assessment by China's intelligence agency is even more alarming. Beijing reportedly believes that the North may have four or five such weapons.⁸

If the United States launched preemptive military strikes against North Korea's nuclear installations, there would be an assortment of grave risks. It is not at all certain that the United States has identified all of the installations, much less that it could successfully eradicate them. (Indeed, the uncertainty about the number—or even existence—of North Korean nuclear weapons illustrates the limits of U.S. intelligence capabilities.) North Korea has had years to build installations deep underground. Pyongyang's reaction to U.S. attacks would also be a matter of concern. It is unlikely that North Korea would passively accept such a blow against its sovereignty. At the very least, Washington would have to expect terrorist retaliation by North Korean operatives against U.S. targets overseas and, possibly, in the United States itself. North Korea might even retaliate by launching full-scale military operations against South Korea—a development that would put U.S. forces stationed in that country in immediate danger.

Indeed, in a worst-case scenario, there is a risk that mushroom clouds could blossom above Seoul and Tokyo—or above U.S. bases in South

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Korea or Okinawa. It is not coincidental that both South Korea and Japan are strongly opposed to a confrontational strategy on the part of the United States.⁹ Even those American pundits and policy experts who are usually inclined to rattle sabers seem strangely cautious in dealing with the current crisis. It is revealing that, in contrast to 1993 and 1994 when hawks both inside and outside the Clinton administration hinted darkly about the possibility of preemptive strikes, almost no one today recommends that course.¹⁰ (The only exceptions appear to be analysts at the Heritage Foundation—and even their hawkishness is tentative.)¹¹ Given the potential for disaster, one hopes that U.S. policymakers continue to spurn the military option.

Option 3: Economic Sanctions

A third option is to try to organize a multilateral regime of economic sanctions to pressure Pyongyang to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Washington's successful effort to persuade its allies to join the United States in suspending fuel oil shipments to the North may be the first stage in such a strategy. Initially, both South Korea and Japan argued against that course, but they ultimately succumbed to U.S. pressure and endorsed Washington's position.¹² The United States has also apparently pressured countries donating food to the UN's World Food Program for distribution in North Korea to cut back or eliminate their donations. As a result, the UN has stopped giving food to 3 million of the 6.4 million North Koreans it had been assisting.¹³ Given the extent of the famine in North Korea during the past few years, such a reduction is no small matter.

But economic coercion has limited prospects for success on the nuclear issue. Trying to further isolate one of the most economically isolated countries is a little like threatening to deprive a monk of worldly pleasures. A policy of tightening economic sanctions may cause additional suffering among North Korea's destitute masses. But such an

approach is unlikely to alter the regime's behavior on the nuclear issue. The key question remains whether Pyongyang is merely using the specter of a nuclear arsenal as a bargaining tactic to secure additional concessions from the United States and its allies or whether North Korea is intent on becoming a nuclear power. If the latter is the case, North Korea's leaders are not going to end their pursuit of that goal merely because the country's oppressed population may experience additional economic pain.

Option 4: Raise the Possibility of a Regional Nuclear Balance

There is one other possibility that ought to be explored. North Korea's motives for pursuing a nuclear weapons capability cannot be determined with certainty. But one possible explanation is that Pyongyang believes that it could then intimidate its non-nuclear neighbors—primarily Japan and South Korea—into making political and economic concessions. Washington ought to convey the message that Pyongyang may be making a serious miscalculation if it assumes that it will have a nuclear monopoly in north-east Asia. North Korea's rulers are counting on the United States to prevent Japan and South Korea from even considering the option of going nuclear. U.S. officials should inform Pyongyang that, if the North insists on crashing the global nuclear weapons club, Washington will urge Tokyo and Seoul to make their own decisions about acquiring strategic deterrents. Even the possibility that South Korea and Japan might do so would come as an extremely unpleasant surprise to North Korea.

The United States does not need to press Tokyo and Seoul to go nuclear. That would be inappropriate. A decision on nuclear weapons would be difficult and politically sensitive in both Japan and South Korea, and the United States should not exert pressure

one way or the other. It is sufficient if Washington informs the South Korean and Japanese governments that the United States would not object to their developing nuclear weapons. That by itself would be a major change in U.S. policy. In addition, U.S. officials should inform their Japanese and South Korean partners that, if they choose to remain nonnuclear, they cannot count on the United States to risk its own security to shield their countries from a nuclear-armed North Korea. Within a decade, Pyongyang may have ballistic missiles capable of reaching targets in the continental United States.¹⁴ Putting American cities at risk to deter attacks on East Asian allies by a volatile and unpredictable adversary would be far too dangerous, and we need to be candid with Japan and South Korea about that point.

Faced with those realities, Japan or South Korea (or perhaps both countries) might well decide to build a nuclear deterrent.¹⁵ Additional nuclear weapons proliferation in northeast Asia is obviously not an ideal outcome, but offsetting the North's illicit advantage may be the best of a set of bad options. Bribery is unlikely to induce North Korea to return to a nonnuclear status. Economic sanctions are not likely to achieve that goal either. And preemptive military strikes are clearly too dangerous. The one chance of getting the North to abandon its current course is to make it clear that Pyongyang may have to deal with nuclear neighbors and would, therefore, not be able to intimidate them. If the United States does not adopt that approach, it is almost certain to be stuck with the responsibility of shielding nonnuclear allies from a volatile, nuclear-armed North Korea. More proliferation may be a troubling outcome, but it beats that nightmare scenario.

Why This Shouldn't Be America's Crisis

Perhaps the most maddening aspect of the current crisis is that the United States should not have to be the country called

upon to choose among difficult and unpalatable options. In a normal international system, the nations that would be most concerned about a possible North Korean nuclear weapons capability would be Pyongyang's immediate neighbors: South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia. They also would logically take the lead in formulating policies to deal with the crisis.

But thanks to more than a half century of Washington's security paternalism, there is nothing normal about the situation in northeast Asia. Japan and South Korea continue to rely heavily on the United States for their defense needs, and, given the ingrained pattern of dependence, they look to Washington to resolve the looming problem posed by North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Even China and Russia expect the United States, as the principal military power in the region, to assume the lead role in that frustrating and probably unrewarding mission.

If it were not for the 37,000 U.S. troops stationed in South Korea and the nearly 50,000 based in Japan, the United States could afford to view the prospect of a nuclear North Korea with relative detachment. U.S. officials regard those troops as crucial military assets in the region, but if Pyongyang cannot be dissuaded from building a nuclear arsenal—and one dares not be optimistic on that score—those troops are no longer assets. They are nuclear hostages.

There is no need to expose American military personnel to such risks. During the early decades of the Cold War, there was a respectable rationale for keeping troops in the region and giving security guarantees to Japan and South Korea. Washington understandably wanted to keep both countries out of the orbit of a rapaciously expansionist Soviet Union or a hostile and volatile China. Furthermore, for many years, Japan and South Korea were too weak to provide for their own defense.

Today's security environment bears no resemblance to that earlier era. The Soviet Union has been replaced by a weak, noncommunist Russia. China's relations with the

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United States, while tense at times, are dramatically better than they were when America made its security commitments to northeast Asia.

Even more important, Japan and South Korea are vastly more capable than they were when they became Washington's security dependents. South Korea now has twice the population of North Korea and an economy some 40 times as large. If Seoul spent even a respectable amount on defense, it could easily outpace its decrepit communist neighbor. But it chooses to spend a smaller percentage of its gross domestic product on the military than does the United States—even though North Korea is on its border, not America's.¹⁶

Japan's timidity on security matters is even more indefensible. Despite a decade-long recession, Japan still has the second largest economy in the world. It also has a population six times larger than North Korea's. It is pathetic to see a country with those characteristics—one of the world's great powers—rely on another country to resolve a security issue that so clearly impinges on Japan's vital interests.

Washington should begin to reduce its discretionary security risks in northeast Asia. It is time—indeed, it is well past time—to tell Japan and South Korea that they must provide for their own defense and take responsibility for dealing with security problems in their region. The continuing reliance of those two countries on the United States is not healthy for them—and it certainly is not healthy for America. Japan and South Korea, together with China and Russia, should bear the burden of dealing with a dangerous and unpredictable North Korea.

Notes

1. Doug Struck, "North Korea Says It Will Renew Work at Reactors," *Washington Post*, December 13, 2002, p. A1.

2. Examples include Susan Shirk, "A New North Korea?" *Washington Post*, October 22, 2002, p. A27; and Anthony Lake and Robert Gallucci, "Negotiating with Nuclear North Korea," *Washington Post*, November 6, 2002, p. A21. Lake and Gallucci did

recommend, however, using diplomatic and economic pressure if necessary to induce Pyongyang to come to the bargaining table.

3. Leon V. Sigal, "A Bombshell That's Actually an Olive Branch," *Los Angeles Times*, October 18, 2002, p. A13; and Selig S. Harrison, "Bargain with North Korea," *USA Today*, October 22, 2002, p. 11A.

4. For discussions of the 1993–94 nuclear crisis and its resolution with the framework agreement, see Doug Bandow, *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Washington: Cato Institute, 1996), pp. 104–5, 112–14, 121–24; and Selig S. Harrison, *Korean Endgame: A Strategy for Reunification and U.S. Disengagement* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), pp. 201–26.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 226–30.

6. White House Press Office, *The National Security Strategy of the United States*, September 2002, pp. 13–16.

7. On President Bush's attempt to distinguish between the two cases, see Elizabeth Bumiller, "Bush Sees Korean Nuclear Effort as Different from Iraq's," *New York Times*, October 22, 2002, p. A6.

8. Michael Sheridan, "Koreans May Have Five Nuclear Missiles," *Times* (London), October 27, 2002, online edition. See also Bill Gertz, "N. Korea Can Build Nukes Right Now," *Washington Times*, November 22, 2002, p. A1. North Korea's own statements on this issue have sent conflicting messages. See Howard W. French, "North Korean Radio Asserts Country Has Nuclear Arms," *New York Times*, November 18, 2002, p. A10; and Howard W. French, "North Korea Clarifies Statement on A-Bomb," *New York Times*, November 19, 2002, p. A16.

9. Peter S. Goodman and John Pomfret, "2 U.S. Allies Urge Engagement," *Washington Post*, October 18, 2002; and Soo-Jeong Lee, "S. Korean Leader Calls for Dialogue," Associated Press, October 23, 2002.

10. For examples of such saber rattling during the earlier crisis, see Bandow, pp. 131–35.

11. According to three Heritage analysts: "In 1994, the Clinton Administration seriously considered undertaking selective military attacks on North Korean nuclear facilities. The United States and its allies in the region may have to consider this kind of option again if its near-term strategy fails. Balbina Y. Hwang, Larry M. Wortzel, and Baker Spring, "North Korea and the End of the Agreed Framework," Heritage Foundation Backgrounder no. 1605, October 18, 2002, p. 3.

12. Andrew Ward and David Ivison, "U.S. Pressed

to Continue Energy Aid to North Korea,” *Financial Times*, November 12, 2002, p. 4; “A Crack in Alliance,” editorial, *Korea Herald*, November 13, 2002, online edition; and Don Kirk, “Korea Leader Backs Plan to Block Oil to the North,” *New York Times*, November 16, 2002, p. A9.

13. Doug Struck, “Aid Used as Lever with Pyongyang,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 2002, p. A18.

14. Bill Gertz, “N. Korea Missile Threat Increases,” *Washington Times*, November 1, 2002, p. A1.

15. For a discussion of the complex South Korean and Japanese attitudes toward nuclear weapons, see Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, pp. 231–56.

16. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2001–2002* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 196–99.

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