<u>**Deterrence and Containment?**</u>

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It is difficult to be optimistic about the upcoming resumption of six-party talks with North Korea. Pyongyang's nuclear test just over three weeks ago may have attracted international attention and censure, but it does not appear to have sparked a transformation in negotiating strategy. Indeed, reaction to the test was a bit like the flawed detonation itself: an explosion of interest rapidly decaying to a fizzle.

The willingness to return to a stagnant bargaining framework stems largely from the belief that even if disarmament talks fail, a combination of containment and deterrence will succeed. The logic behind this position is two-fold: first, the United States can credibly deter North Korea from selling any weapons because the fallout from a nuclear blast even by a third party would carry the unmistakable signature of its origin and result in devastating retaliation; second, the United States can successfully contain North Korea by creating a multilateral interdiction regime capable of intercepting any weapons Pyongyang does elect to sell.

This approach is deeply suspect. To begin with, the very intensity with which the United States is pursuing containment measures – such as radiation monitors on the Chinese border – casts doubt on its faith in deterrence. Even if we can identify the source of a nuclear attack as accurately as some suggest, there are still intermediate forms of proliferation where the red line of deterrence may be less clear. As the Cold War demonstrated repeatedly, adversaries have a knack for finding and exploiting the ambiguities in even the most explicit terms. Indeed, the Korean War itself broke out after confusion over the precise extent of the U.S. "defensive perimeter" in East Asia.

When President George Bush stated that the transfer of nuclear weapons or "material" by North Korea would be considered a grave threat to the United States, just what did he mean? Is Pyongyang free to market tools of the trade so long as it does not sell the finished product? If Kim Jong Il confronts harsh economic sanctions, he may find it worth the risk to test the boundaries of America's resolve. It would be a harrowing decision to wage war over a small shipment of plutonium, yet there do not seem to be many other escalation options left.

Nor can the United States reasonably rely on containment. It is possible to ship plutonium in containers with lead shielding to confound radiation detectors. And even a robust maritime interdiction regime is only as effective as the intelligence capabilities supporting it.

What this means is that deterrence and containment should be last resorts, not preferred strategies. Returning to the six-party talks is a partial acceptance of this conclusion, but not if there is little hope of a positive outcome. An isolated regime in the crosshairs of the world's most powerful military is likely to bear any burden to retain its ultimate deterrent. Measuring the success of foreign policy toward North Korea based on how many countries agree to slap its wrist with half-hearted sanctions, then, begins to feel like an exercise in futility. Rather than insist on tepid multilateralism, perhaps the United States should embrace a bilateral dialogue. After all, the only previous breakthrough in negotiations came when President Carter met with Kim Il Sung face-to-face in 1994.

It may be that nothing will suffice to convince North Korea to give up the bomb. But that doesn't mean that trying to break the regime is the answer. Whether the reactors at Yongbyon will continue to churn out plutonium is an open question and a genuine danger – one that we already know will not be curtailed by threats alone. The international community should not fall prey to the siren song of deterrence and containment, but should explore novel methods of negotiation toward disarmament.