
North Korea and the United States: A Strategic Profile

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Abstract

The true motivation behind North Korea's nuclear weapons program may be known only to Kim Jong-Il and his military advisers. Nevertheless, through an analysis of a state's bargaining positions, rhetoric, and military decisions, it is possible to create a strategic profile that can help to determine its primary interests and probable future choices. In North Korea's case, it appears that defensive objectives are paramount, with its nuclear program serving either as a source of exchange in return for a security guarantee, or a means to deter the United States from taking aggressive action.

The troubling possibility is that due to North Korea's dire financial situation, reprocessed plutonium from the Yongbyon reactor will find its way onto the black market and into the hands of terrorists, despite the best efforts of the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI). This may be an unlikely prospect, given that to date North Korea has only exported its missile technology, and not any Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). However, circumstances may change, or an unexpected coup could create a scramble for nuclear material beyond international control. This dire prospect should drive U.S. negotiators to be more flexible and conciliatory in its settlement efforts, since there are few other credible options and time is very much on North Korea's side.

Introduction

In a 1939 radio broadcast, Winston Churchill conceded the virtual impossibility of forecasting the next move of the Soviet Union, remarking that the communist state was “a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma.”¹ And yet, he continued, the key to the puzzle may lie in a consideration of Russian national interests.

If there is one country that ought to inherit the mantle for a reputation of inscrutability, it would be the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK), also known as North Korea. The reclusive state boasts an unmatched level of secrecy and intrigue, and is run by a leader reported to have kidnapped a South Korean actress and film director so he could have movies made to order. Intelligence services worldwide appear to be as much in the dark as analysts and commentators, with many news breakthroughs coming from defector reports and most negotiations conducted in private behind-the-scene channels. As Churchill observed, such uncertainty ought not to engender complacency, but rather focus attention on a calculation of interests, which perhaps can be a useful indicator of a likely strategy.

This article will begin with exactly that approach, investigating the possible intentions of North Korea based on its goals, values, and risk-tolerance. It will then move on to look at U.S. interests in the region and its associated level of resolve in any potential conflict. Next, it will briefly examine the prospects for a successful American preventive strike on North Korean WMD assets, and then couple that with an account of the likelihood and consequences of a retaliatory strike by the DPRK. Finally, it will consider other policy options open to the United States, before offering a conclusion of how U.S. strategy ought to be framed to best deal with the profile North Korea appears to present.

1 Robert Rhodes James, ed., *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches, 1897–1963*, Vol. 6 (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974), p. 6161.

DPRK Intentions

Divining the political and strategic goals that North Korea hopes to achieve through its WMD program is admittedly a daunting task, but one that merits special consideration, given its relevance to crafting an American response. If the DPRK perceives its burgeoning arsenal as a militarily useful tool, the proper opposing disposition of forces and doctrine will be entirely different than if North Korea is truly solely trying to deter a preemptive attack on its facilities. Victor Cha provides a very useful illustration of this underlying uncertainty, depicting the North Korean WMD program in metaphorical terms as potentially a shield meant to provide protection from attack, a sword intended for aggressive or revisionist purposes, or a badge to serve as a symbol of prestige as well as confer leverage in talks.² Most unsettling of all is the possibility that the suspected WMD could have multiple ends, for a strong shield can offer a great incentive to brave an attempt at brandishing the sword.

Taking these possibilities in reverse order, the persistence with which North Korea ties its WMD programs to negotiations lends credence to the view that they are primarily a bargaining chip to elicit more substantial economic and political concessions.³ The 1994 Agreed Framework was probably the most explicit *quid pro quo*, linking a freeze in plutonium reprocessing to American and South Korean shipments of oil and the planned construction of a light-water reactor. This deal led many to believe that North Korea was not determined to develop a nuclear arsenal regardless of cost, but was perhaps capitalizing on the one sensitive area that could bring such a poor country respect, attention, and financial gain. At the same time, a growing number of analysts believe that the DPRK nuclear “card” is too valuable to be played only once and instead will be retained as a hidden trump used both for protection and leverage.⁴ Indeed, CIA Director George Tenet recently

2 Victor D. Cha, “North Korea’s Weapons of Mass Destruction: Badges, Shields, or Swords?” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 117, No. 2 (Summer 2002), p. 211.

3 Chung Min Lee, “Coping with the North Korean Missile Threat: Implications for Northeast Asia and Korea,” in Natalie W. Crawford and Chung-in Moon, eds., *Emerging Threats, Force Structures, and the Role of Air Power in Korea* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2000), p. 225.

testified that Kim Jong-Il appeared to be attempting to negotiate an implicit tolerance of North Korea as a nuclear state, even as he invoked such a threat to spur an improvement in relations.⁵ Support for the “badge” or bargaining chip theory of DPRK nuclear status is sharply undermined by North Korea’s determined attempts to further refine and diversify its research and production, hardly a sensible economic approach for an asset that is meant to be bargained away.

If the depth and scope of North Korea’s nuclear program belie its use solely as a bargaining chip or status symbol, then special attention must be given to military efforts that could indicate the DPRK’s intention of brandishing an atomic bomb as a “sword” to either attack directly, provide strategic cover for a conventional assault, or coerce South Korea and its allies. To be sure, evidence of reputed North Korean offensive designs must be weighed in context of the over 50 years of relative peace that have prevailed on the Korean Peninsula. At the same time, it is possible that the introduction of a nuclear equalizer on the DPRK side, no matter how drastically outnumbered by the U.S. arsenal, could create the perception of a military balance in North Korea’s favor, one that might even instigate a more bold and risk-accepting policy. As far as force disposition can illuminate, North Korea’s extreme forward troop concentration—over 70 percent of its army is stationed south of Pyongyang—seems to reveal a preemption-friendly belief in the advantages of the offense and the importance of holding Seoul at risk with little tactical warning.⁶ The difficulty with such analysis, however, is that it is equally plausible that such a seemingly aggressive deployment could merely serve as a credible threat of

4 Andrew Mack, “A Nuclear North Korea,” *World Policy Journal*, Vol. XI, No. 2 (Summer 1994), p. 27; and Joel S. Wit, “North Korea: The Leader of the Pack,” *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 24, No. 1 (Winter 2001), p. 88.

5 George J. Tenet, Hearing on “The Worldwide Threat in 2003: Evolving Dangers in a Complex World,” before the Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, Washington DC, Feb. 12, 2003.

6 Thomas A. Schwartz, Hearing on North Korea before the Armed Services Committee, U.S. Senate, Washington DC, March 5, 2002; Victor D. Cha, “Hawk Engagement and Preventive Defense on the Korean Peninsula,” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Summer 2002), p. 52; and Homer T. Hodge, “North Korea’s Military Strategy,” *Parameters*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 1 (Spring 2003), p. 72.

a deterrent nature. The familiar security dilemma concept obscures the true intent behind North Korean military enhancements including infantry mechanization, the addition of thousands of long-range artillery tubes, and the expansion of special operations forces.⁷ Do such procurements, which are especially suited to carrying out offensives deep into enemy territory, betray hostile designs? According to Victor Cha, “Since 1980, the KPA have improved their capabilities in ways that are difficult to interpret as wholly defensive.”⁸ And yet, nuclear weapons are a perfect example of a military asset that can truly only be used offensively but may have an underlying, perhaps even primary, defensive purpose. The danger of a spiraling reaction to ambiguous strategic decisions (trying to deter or preempt what one believes could be a preemptive posture by an adversary) is a constant source of danger in international affairs.

North Korea’s rhetoric is unlikely to resolve this dilemma, as it oscillates between the desire to be left alone from American aggression and the militant insistence that there will be a reuniting—perhaps by force—of the Korean fatherland. Analyses of the balance of conventional forces across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) seem to suggest that any North Korean offensive would ultimately be a losing prospect, though there would be tremendous casualties on all sides. One analyst remarks that “[a] traditional armored assault by North Korean forces would amount to putting metal into a metalgrinder, and be fairly straightforward for the allies to stop.”⁹ The question, of course, is whether the DPRK military leadership has come to the same realization, especially given its efforts at military modernization. Perhaps such investment is a North Korean version of “flexible response,” seeking to have adequate conventional means to inflict damage in the event of a U.S. preemptive strike on its nuclear facilities. Or perhaps it is meant to intimidate and thereby gain concessions from regional rivals, a prospect that

7 Cha, “Badges, Shields, or Swords?” p. 226.

8 Victor D. Cha, “Making Sense of the Black Box: Hypotheses on Strategic Doctrine and the DPRK Threat,” in Samuel S. Kim, ed., *The North Korean System in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 185.

9 Michael O’Hanlon, “Stopping a North Korean Invasion: Why Defending South Korea is Easier than the Pentagon Thinks,” *International Security*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (Spring 1998), p. 136.

is leading Japan to consider stepping up its retaliatory and preemptive capabilities, possibly even with nuclear weapons of its own.¹⁰ Ironically, the DPRK's apocalyptic images of any war are more indicative of a primarily conservative perspective, since they are based on the acceptance that fighting on the Korean Peninsula would be quite costly. This speaks for at least a base understanding of deterrence by North Korea, recognizing that any attack on South Korea or the United States would likely bring immense retaliation. Such awareness diminishes the credibility of any coercive threats of major war, but certainly could provide some confidence that smaller provocations would go unpunished.

If there is limited value of an atomic sword, could the North Korean nuclear program best be seen as a shield against a feared United States attack? The available evidence supports this conceptualization, to a point. Many analysts stress the fact that despite its occasional rash behavior, North Korea has generally acceded to compromise in the face of intense international pressure.¹¹ Both the Agreed Framework and the 1998 missile testing moratorium were examples of concessions that would not have been made had North Korea sought nuclear arms and advanced delivery devices at all costs. The important point to keep in mind is that the DPRK has very legitimate security concerns. As Barry Schneider humorously remarked, "... as the saying goes, just because you are paranoid, it does not mean someone is not out to get you. North Korean fears of preemption are not entirely misplaced. . . ."¹² North Korea sees the Bush Doctrine, the "axis of evil" appellation, and President's Bush's admission that he "loathes Kim Jong-Il," collectively as a virtual declaration of war that threatens the very existence of its country.¹³ With such pressure from the world's sole superpower bear-

10 Doug Struck, "Threat Erodes Japan's Pacifism," *Washington Post*, Feb. 15, 2003.

11 Chuck Downs, *Over the Line: North Korea's Negotiating Strategy* (Washington DC: AEI Press, 1999), p. 282; Jung-Hoon Lee and Il Hyun Cho, "The North Korean Missiles: A Military Threat or a Survival Kit?" *The Korean Journal of Defense Analysis*, Vol. XII, No. 1 (Summer 2000), p. 152; and Steven R. Weisman, "Weighing 'Deterrence' vs. 'Aggression,'" *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2002.

12 Barry R. Schneider, *Radical Responses to Radical Regimes: Evaluating Preemptive Counter-proliferation*, McNair Paper No. 41 (Washington, DC: NDU Press, May 1995), p. 32.

13 Doug Struck, "For North Korea, U.S. is Violator of Accords," *Washington Post*,

ing down on a reclusive state with few allies, it is little wonder that the former commander of U.S. forces in Korea expressed concern over the realization of a "cornered rat syndrome."¹⁴ North Korea has even gone so far as to express that they "truly fear a U.S. attack," a surprising admission for a state some believe is plotting to stage an attack of its own.¹⁵

There are several indications that North Korea's protestations of insecurity are not mere diversionary tactics but are in fact genuine. First, the considerable value the DPRK placed on having the United States and South Korea suspend Team Spirit exercises reveals a growing apprehension over the widening gap of military preparedness across the DMZ.¹⁶ If North Korea truly felt it was in a dominant strategic position on the Korean Peninsula, it would probably have far more important bargaining interests. Second, the decision to place the Yongbyon reactor in plain view rather than within a hardened shelter below ground like much of North Korea's significant equipment and artillery stresses its value as a symbol of deterrence rather than a key military asset.¹⁷ While the recently discovered uranium enrichment facility was kept secret and its location is still not precisely known, this may have been due to dissatisfaction with the implementation of the Agreed Framework, and not some belief that nuclear weapons will confer some kind of offensive advantage. Indeed, there is further evidence that the DPRK nuclear program is not well integrated into its military structure, also hinting toward a deterrence mindset rather than a belief in the operational utility of nuclear weapons.¹⁸ The recurring theme in

Oct. 21, 2002; Julia Preston, "North Korea Demands U.S. Agree to Nonaggression Pact," *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 2002; Bob Woodward, "A Course of 'Confident Action,'" *Washington Post*, Nov. 19, 2002; and James T. Laney and Jason T. Shaplen, "How to Deal with North Korea," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 2 (March/April 2003), p. 20.

14 Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (London: Warner Books, 1997), p. 314.

15 Paul Eckert, "N. Korea Still Recognizes '94 Pact With U.S., Ex-Envoy Says," *Washington Post*, Nov. 7, 2002.

16 Michael J. Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb: A Case Study in Nonproliferation* (London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1995), p. 132.

17 Bruce Cummings, *Korea's Place in the Sun* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997), p. 468.

North Korean negotiations is a persistent desire for a nonaggression treaty with the United States, the most obvious sign of defensive intentions and legitimate fear. It is because of these factors that most analysts conclude that North Korea desires nuclear weapons as a deterrence failsafe in the event that it cannot secure some guarantee of peaceful intent on the part of the United States. Despite the fact that pursuing an atomic deterrent may bring about the very attack it seeks to avoid, it seems to be a risk North Korea feels it must take.

A final disturbing possibility is that North Korea may see nuclear weapons as a commodity for sale to shore up its failing economy. Such an option, raised by the North Korean negotiator at the April 2003 talks with the United States, cannot be brushed aside lightly given the extensive past of DPRK proliferation activities. Over the last decade North Korea has cooperated with Pakistan by exchanging missile parts in return for gas centrifuges and machinery to assist in enriching uranium.¹⁹ And once such technology or material is out of the country, there is little control over its final destination, as proven by recent revelations of deals for missile and nuclear technology among Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.²⁰ North Korea's arms contacts extend far and wide, from Yemen to Germany and China, and there is little doubt that there would be many interested buyers for weapons grade plutonium or a completed nuclear device.²¹ At the same time, despite being designated as a prime proliferation threat, there is no evidence that North Korea has sought to export any of its WMD capabilities. Moreover, as Victor Cha and David Kang have noted, the only link between North Korea

18 Cha, "Making Sense of the Black Box," p. 181.

19 David E. Sanger, "In North Korea and Pakistan, Deep Roots of Nuclear Barter," *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 2002.

20 Douglas Frantz, "Iran Closes in On Ability to Build a Nuclear Bomb," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug 4, 2003; Joby Warrick, "Iran Admits Foreign Help On Nuclear Facility," *Washington Post*, Aug. 27, 2003; David R. Sands, "Israeli General Says Saudis Seek to Buy Pakistan Nukes," *Washington Times*, Oct. 23, 2003; and David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "From Rogue Nuclear Programs, Web of Trails Leads to Pakistan," *New York Times*, Jan. 3, 2004.

21 Bill Gertz, "China Ships North Korea Ingredient for Nuclear Arms," *Washington Times*, Dec. 17, 2002; and Bill Gertz, "N. Korea Ship Gets Arms In and Out," *Washington Times*, Feb. 18, 2003.

and the rest of the "axis of evil" has been financial; transferring any nuclear know-how would be an enormously risky proposition given the extent of U.S. concern.²² North Korean ties to terrorist entities have largely dissipated, with the main grounds for keeping the DPRK on the U.S. list of state-sponsors of terrorism being its lack of support for international efforts to combat terror. The U.S. State Department's *Patterns of Global Terrorism* acknowledges that North Korea has not sponsored any terrorist acts since 1987, and only makes the vague claim that it has "sold weapons to various terrorist groups."²³ North Korea's previous restraint in selling WMD certainly should not inspire confidence that such a policy will continue, especially in light of direct threats to the contrary, but it at least tempers allegations that North Korea is primarily interested in nuclear technology for the financial benefits. The immense cost, risk, and sacrifice involved in the DPRK nuclear program, far beyond what could likely be recouped, suggests that other motivations were likely more central.

As this analysis shows, North Korea's nuclear intentions are not easily discerned nor are they likely to be compartmentalized into discrete objectives. In all likelihood, there is probably not even a consensus within North Korea, as the reasons that Kim Il Sung created the program years ago may not be the same as those which lead his son to expand it today. Assuming that Kim Jong-Il is the sole decision maker, only he can know the true long-term plan, and even that can change with the circumstances. Nevertheless, social scientists can infer likely costs and benefits, analyze past behavior, and thereby attempt to determine a nation's current strategic interests and probable future choices. In this case, the bargaining positions and military decisions the DPRK has made strongly imply that it views a nuclear capability primarily as a deterrent against the uncertain prospect of U.S. efforts to topple its regime. It is true that North Korea's conventional forces pose a deterrent threat as well, but they may not be as credible in certain limited contin-

22 Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, "The Korea Crisis," *Foreign Policy* (May/June 2003), pp. 20 and 22.

23 U.S. Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism, 2002* (Washington DC: April 2003), pp. 80-81. See also James Miles, "Waiting Out North Korea," *Survival*, Vol. 44, No. 2 (Summer 2002), p. 42.

gencies such as a focused preemptive strike. While more aggressive designs, such as coercive diplomacy or exporting plutonium, are conceivable, they are not in line with North Korean interests or practice.

U.S. Interests

Given the American troop presence in South Korea and nearby on Okinawa, there can be little doubt that the region is of prime strategic importance to the United States. Ambiguity may pervade the U.S. defense commitments to Taiwan in the event of war with China, but the initiation of hostilities on the Korean Peninsula would unavoidably involve American forces. At the same time, whether the United States has sufficient resolve to respond to circumstances short of war, such as the DPRK development of a nuclear arsenal, is unknown. Thus far, American presidents have refrained from issuing an ultimatum regarding the specific nature of consequences that would flow from the creation of a robust North Korean nuclear program. An attempt at regime change along the *Iraqi Freedom* model is probably out of the question due to the prospect of mass casualties. To this extent at least, it seems apparent that North Korea is able to deter the United States, since Iraq had a considerably less mature nuclear weapons program that nevertheless struck many U.S. policymakers as unacceptably dangerous.²⁴ However, the United States is far from indifferent to a prospective North Korean nuclear arsenal, as demonstrated by its willingness to contemplate military strikes and sanctions, as well as offer an array of incentives for DPRK forbearance.

U.S. interests on the Korean Peninsula, and regarding the DPRK WMD program in particular, center on four major concerns:²⁵

First and foremost, the United States fears that North Korea might choose to sell any of its excess plutonium to other states or

²⁴ Joseph S. Nye, "Hourglass Runs Low," *Los Angeles Times*, March 12, 2003.

²⁵ Ashton B. Carter, "The Korean Nuclear Crisis," *Harvard Magazine*, Vol. 106, No. 1 (September/October 2003), p. 41. See also Michael E. O'Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), p. 41.

possibly even to terrorist organizations. Especially after September 11, 2001, there is an understandable reluctance on the part of the U.S. administration to rely on deterrence, or to count on being able to interdict a nuclear terrorist plot. As mentioned, exporting WMD is an unlikely ambition of the DPRK, but the disturbing fact is that it will be virtually impossible to know whether such a transfer ever takes place. Sufficient plutonium for a nuclear weapon can be the mere size of a grapefruit, and it is unrealistic for the United States to search all ships leaving port or have any hope of catching smuggling across North Korea's border with China.²⁶

Second, since it is difficult to tell how robust the DPRK government is, unintended nuclear proliferation could also occur through the chaos that would likely follow from the fall of Kim Jong-Il's regime. As an instructive analogy, immediately preceding the invasion of Iraq, satellite imagery showed a heavy flow of traffic into Syria that some officials believe may have consisted of material from Hussein's weapons program.²⁷ Similarly, if North Korea produces and disperses nuclear devices in remote locations to avoid detection and possible destruction, it will be extremely difficult to keep track of weapons stolen by factions looking to turn a quick profit on the black market in the midst of a civil war or coup. As with direct exports, this form of indirect proliferation would also pose a severe threat to the United States if a terrorist group ever tried to make an American city a nuclear target.

Third, in line with the "shield" and "sword" theory of North Korean nuclear objectives, the DPRK may view nuclear weapons as a strategic safeguard to provide cover for more provocative policies or military coercion. Historically, the Korean People's Army has not been particularly risk-averse in asserting sea boundaries, challenging U.S. reconnaissance missions, and destabilizing the tense stand-off at the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) through infiltrations or efforts at intimidation. Hard-liners in the DPRK military hierarchy could use nuclear weapons as a rationale to pursue a more assertive and threat-

²⁶ William J. Perry, "It's Either Nukes or Negotiation," *Washington Post*, July 23, 2003.

²⁷ Douglas Jehl, "Iraq Removed Arms Material, Aide Says," *New York Times*, Oct. 29, 2003.

ening campaign to gain concessions or perhaps seek to force steps toward unification on terms more favorable to the North. Even if a nuclear North Korea does not significantly alter the military balance across the DMZ, it will certainly ratchet up yet further the contests of brinksmanship that seem to be a habitual occurrence, and thereby increase the risk of miscalculation, accidents, and disaster. Finally, faced with an unpredictable and existential threat in their midst, some regional actors are likely to seek a stronger guarantee of their security, either through firmer commitments from the United States or by creating a nuclear arsenal of their own.²⁸ This nuclear “domino effect” is certainly entirely feasible given that states like South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan all have the technological wherewithal but have been restrained thus far by U.S. pressure and security assistance. While this secondary proliferation would not pose a direct threat to U.S. interests, since these three most immediate neighbors are U.S. allies, it could spur other countries to follow suit and thereby eliminate altogether the fragile normative restraints inherent in agreements like the Nonproliferation Treaty. Efforts to constrain other potential nuclear powers—like Iran, Syria, or Saudi Arabia—would likely fail for being unacceptably hypocritical. Besides the self-evident dangers of a nuclearized Middle East, more fingers on nuclear triggers in general increase the danger of catastrophic accidents or failures of deterrence.

Thus, American interests in preventing North Korea from developing nuclear weapons are plainly very significant. The dilemma lies in determining what U.S. countermeasures are appropriate in response, given the dangers inherent in both action and inaction. The following two sections will discuss U.S. policy options, beginning with the most controversial: weighing the strategic costs and benefits of an attack on North Korea’s nuclear facilities.

28 Marc Dean Millot, “Facing the Emerging Reality of Regional Nuclear Adversaries,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 3 (Summer 1994), p. 56.

Preventive Strike Considerations

Considering that previous promises from North Korea regarding its WMD program have been less than reliable, U.S. strategists are often drawn back to contemplating a unilateral solution by force: conducting an Osiraq-style pinpoint attack on Yongbyon and other suspected nuclear facilities. The prospect of a preventive strike was an element of the 1993–94 crisis between the United States and North Korea, and remains an underlying threat behind current negotiations since the United States has declared that although invasion is not an option, other military options remain on the table. Some of those options, according to Pentagon contingency plans, include cruise missile strikes on WMD sites accompanied by tactical nuclear attacks against North Korea’s hardened artillery positions.²⁹

While one might be tempted to dismiss this strategizing as nothing more than unrealistic drawing board sketches, a serious assessment of such plans is appropriate since not only might U.S. offensive means become inevitable if the DPRK chooses to sell WMD or initiate its own attacks, but some respected analysts believe that destroying North Korea’s WMD potential is the only certain way to avoid unacceptable proliferation. For instance, James Woolsey and Thomas McInerney, former U.S. government officials, argued in a provocative opinion piece that unless the multilateral talks—with China’s help in particular—succeed in terminating North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, the United States should proceed with an aerial assault to disarm the DPRK, despite the risk of full-scale war.³⁰

The principal concerns regarding a preventive strike against North Korea center around two issues: the uncertain likelihood of success and the potential consequences of a retaliatory response. First, the very dearth of intelligence that exacerbates the crisis with North Korea also frustrates the ability to resolve it by force. It is dubious that the United States has the wherewithal to find and destroy facilities that it is uncertain exist. With ambiguous data surrounding North Korea’s emission

29 Nicholas D. Kristof, “Secret Scary Plans,” *New York Times*, Feb. 28, 2003.

30 R. James Woolsey and Thomas G. McInerney, “The Next Korean War,” *Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 4, 2003.

of krypton, a gas associated with the reprocessing of plutonium, U.S. analysts appear unsure as to whether Yongbyon is the primary reprocessing facility or whether an alternative hidden plant exists.³¹ Moreover, there seems to be even less certainty over the location of the uranium enrichment plant that sparked the entire controversy in October 2002.³² North Korea is masterful in its concealment and deception, moving sensitive activity beneath the Earth's surface where it cannot easily be detected by spy satellites. This burrowing strategy is extensive; South Korea estimates that the North has more than 8,000 underground installations, including 500 kilometers of tunnels.³³ Assuming for the moment that American and South Korean intelligence agencies have secret knowledge of the location of North Korean nuclear sites, it is highly doubtful that these areas will be vulnerable to conventional air strikes. Underground facilities are not only shielded from prying electronic eyes, but can be constructed to be virtually impervious to aerial bombardment. The U.S. campaign in Afghanistan demonstrated that even multiple attacks with large fuel-explosive bombs often leave hardened enclaves protected by natural rock formations unscathed. Worse still, even if such sites could be located and destroyed, since North Korea has already removed (and likely dispersed) the plutonium from the Yongbyon reactor, reprocessing can occur anywhere and could be delayed until it is undetectable. Thus, while the United States could undoubtedly cause substantial damage to North Korea's nuclear facilities, a preventive strike would be unlikely to destroy the plutonium that the DPRK could use either for sale abroad or for future manufacture into nuclear weapons.

Second, and perhaps decisively, the DPRK has many options for causing unacceptable harm both to South Korea and the United States. North Korea may not, despite its boasts, have the capability to send a

31 David E. Sanger and Howard W. French, "North Korea Prompts U.S. to Investigate Nuclear Boast," *New York Times*, May 1, 2003; and David E. Sanger and Thom Shanker, "North Korea Hides New Nuclear Site, Evidence Suggests," *New York Times*, July 20, 2003.

32 John Diamond, "N. Korea Keeps U.S. Intelligence Guessing," *USA Today*, March 10, 2003.

33 Kongdan Oh and Ralph C. Hassig, *North Korea: Through the Looking Glass* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), p. 108.

missile to the continental U.S., but it has plenty of missiles with ample range to reach its regional adversaries. The Commander of U.S. Forces in Korea, General Leon LaPorte, estimates that the DPRK possesses over 800 missiles capable of striking the Korean Peninsula and surrounding countries.³⁴ Add to this an estimated 10,000 artillery pieces, and it becomes clear that North Korea can wreak devastation in the region regardless of whether it has nuclear weapons or not. LaPorte emphasizes the asymmetric nature of North Korea's threat, which he believes is based on a 120,000 strong special operations force and a doctrine of using CW as munitions.³⁵ Though the United States and South Korea have a far superior air force and a well-trained army, the sheer numbers the DPRK can bring to bear in terms of both manpower and artillery mean that any war will be incredibly costly. This is not to say that the ultimate success of the United States and South Korea in any all-out conflict would be in doubt, especially if initiated by the North, merely that it would be a far different conflict from the experience in Iraq.

In principle, it is possible that the United States could launch a preventive strike and not face any retaliation from North Korea—this is the dual nature of deterrence on the Korean Peninsula. However, given the scale of the air assault that would be necessary to cripple the DPRK nuclear program, it is extremely unlikely that a U.S. president, much less his South Korean counterpart, would authorize such an attack bar in response to an invasion or highly substantial provocation. Thus, most analysts prefer to bracket a preventive strike as a last resort and instead focus on other policy options, several of which we now turn to.

Policy Alternatives

The simplest approach for the United States is to attempt to "wait out" North Korea, hoping that the passage of time will ease the conflict.

34 Leon LaPorte, "This Week With George Stephanopoulos," *ABC News Transcripts*, July 27, 2003.

35 Bill Gertz, "U.S. Commander Fears N. Korea Would Sell Nukes," *Washington Times*, Nov. 18, 2003.

Dictatorships cannot last forever, and the dismal state of the North Korean economy would generally suggest that since its people are on the brink of starvation, a popular revolution would be inevitable. Unfortunately, such forecasts have been wrong many times in the past. North Korea is a remarkably hardy and proud country, and it is also a totalitarian dictatorship. Chairman Mao presided over the deaths of more than 20 million Chinese and remained in power, and there is no reason to believe that Kim Jong-Il cannot do the same. Leadership mortality is also a false hope; not only is Kim Jong-Il relatively young, but his successful family transition from Kim Il Sung indicates that the same should be possible to the next generation. Nor is the challenge of nuclear proliferation a long-term prospect that is compatible with a wait-and-see approach. Unlike Iraq, North Korea has a confirmed supply of plutonium and the reprocessing technology to produce weapons grade fuel. It is very possible that North Korea has already completed the reprocessing stage, in which case the danger of transfer or weapons production will persist regardless of what kind of regime is in power.

The nature of North Korea's leadership, though, is relevant when calculating the extent of the danger posed by its WMD possession. A more moderate DPRK with a stake in the status quo would be less likely to push relations to the brink of war or risk the consequences of selling nuclear material abroad. Consequently, to create a positive influence, many analysts advocate a strategy of engagement, encouraging reform and reassuring Kim Jong-Il that the United States does not have aggressive intentions. The process of engagement can take many forms, ranging from conciliatory measures like offering food aid, to more conditional agreements such as granting trading rights in return for inspections or a freeze on missile testing. The most prominent trade-off under consideration is the exchange of a multilateral security guarantee of some kind for the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear facilities. Disagreement persists, however, over whether both sides should move simultaneously or in coordinated and reciprocal steps. The U.S. reluctance to offer even a basic unilateral security guarantee is curious given its repeated statements that an invasion is not being considered. According to David Kang, an expert on Korean security, if the United States truly has no intention of starting a war, it should be willing to put it in writing, especially if it leads to important concessions from the

DPRK.³⁶ One concern is that such a promise could tie the United States' hands in the event that conditions change, with little concrete in return, but it is hard to imagine a scenario short of full-scale war (in which case the guarantee would of course be void) in which the United States would invade North Korea.³⁷ More telling is how adamantly the DPRK appears to desire an agreement that ultimately is based on nothing more than the word and honor of the U.S. president. This demonstrates that North Korea really does seem willing to strike a deal of some sort. The DPRK has claimed that "everything will be negotiable" in disarmament talks, and has pursued several private channels of communication to try and jumpstart negotiations.³⁸ Such attempts at diplomacy may merely be a diversion to keep the United States occupied while DPRK nuclear development continues apace, but they are substantial enough to signal openness to compromise. After all, North Korea never needed to consent to the Agreed Framework, and despite the creation of an alternative uranium enrichment facility, abided by the freeze on Yongbyon for nearly a decade.

On the other side of the coin are those who believe that reform is impossible or highly unlikely and thus recommend a strategy of containment, perhaps with direct efforts to undermine Kim Jong-Il's regime. Given North Korea's dependence on aid and its limited international trade, the prospect of sanctions is a genuine threat to its well-being and security. Several times in the past, North Korea has identified the imposition of sanctions as a *casus belli*, and perhaps as a result U.S. officials have ceased pressing for them at the U.N. Security Council.³⁹ A fundamental restraint on U.S. freedom to pursue tough containment measures is the unwillingness of its neighbors, particularly

36 Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang, *Nuclear North Korea: A Debate on Engagement Strategies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 116.

37 Peter Grier and Faye Bowers, "Pyongyang Options Opening Up," *Christian Science Monitor*, Jan. 9, 2003.

38 Philip Shenon, "North Korea Says Nuclear Program Can be Negotiated," *New York Times*, Nov. 3, 2002; David E. Sanger, "North Korea Open Unofficial Channel for U.S. Talks," *New York Times*, Jan. 10, 2003; and Steven R. Weisman, "Private Group Prepares Visit to North Korea," *New York Times*, Jan. 4, 2004.

39 Doug Struck, "U.S. Signals It Won't Seek Sanctions against N. Korea," *Washington Post*, Jan. 23, 2003.

South Korea, to allow the North to fall apart, possibly resulting in an “implosion-explosion” scenario that would be far worse than an unsteady peace.⁴⁰ However, there are several alternative forms of leverage that would not create the same risk of a meltdown and refugee crisis. One idea is to smuggle in small radios which are currently prohibited by the North Korean government in order to combat the pervasive censorship over knowledge about the outside world.⁴¹ Alternatively, encouraging family reunions with South Korea and any other forms of cultural exchange or international events will inevitably expose more North Koreans to the extreme deprivation they endure relative to the other nations. Unfortunately, any of these “softer” measures are of uncertain efficacy and would have no direct impact on preventing the DPRK from producing nuclear weapons, which is an immediate concern.

The most important containment objective is establishing a regime to prevent North Korea from exporting any fissile material. The Proliferation Security Initiative is the international effort created for this purpose, designed to develop “new means to disrupt WMD trafficking at sea, in the air, and on land.”⁴² The challenge, which may very well be insurmountable, is that plutonium emits a faint radiation signature, complicating the ability to detect its presence in cargo or other transport containers.⁴³ Couple this with the fact that usable plutonium can be as small as a football, and the further reality that North Korea’s border with China is relatively porous and unmonitored, and it becomes evident that interdiction will be an enormously difficult task for the Proliferation Security Initiative.⁴⁴ Numerous opportunities for smug-

40 Robert A. Manning, “The Enigma of the North,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Summer 1999), p. 72; and Anthony Lake and Robert Gallucci, “Negotiating with Nuclear North Korea,” *Washington Post*, Nov. 6, 2002.

41 James Brooke, “Infiltrators of North Korea: Tiny Radios,” *New York Times*, March 3, 2003.

42 John R. Bolton, Remarks to the Conference of the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis and the Fletcher School’s International Security Studies Program, Washington DC, Dec. 2, 2003.

43 Sonni Efron, “U.S. Officials in a Quandary Over N. Korea,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 8, 2003.

44 O’Hanlon and Mochizuki, *Crisis on the Korean Peninsula*, p. 34.

gling exist, and so containment of North Korean nuclear proliferation will ultimately rely less on the ability to actually intercept illegal shipments with high reliability than on the power of deterrence to dissuade the DPRK from ever attempting to transfer due to the potential consequences.

Conclusions

Naturally these policy alternatives are not mutually exclusive; in his well-known recommendations, former Defense Secretary William Perry urged the United States to present North Korea with two paths—engagement and containment—which would be dependent on the DPRK’s disarmament choices.⁴⁵ Victor Cha likewise argued that engagement is intertwined with containment because “today’s carrots can be tomorrow’s sticks,” lending justification and support for harsher options should North Korea reject attempts at conciliation.⁴⁶ The trouble is that this metaphorical transformation can occur in either direction; it appears that the possibility of removing sanctions (the “stick”) against Libya became a very appealing “carrot” to motivate Gadaffi’s acceptance of an inspections regime.⁴⁷ The fact that Libya held firm for several decades and developed a surprisingly robust WMD program in the meantime, though, should give pause to applying this model to North Korea.

As many commentators ruefully note, the trouble with North Korean negotiations is that there are few attractive options: too strong a position lacks credibility because the United States is unwilling to seriously risk war on the Korean Peninsula unless it is seriously endangered, but too soft a line could embolden the DPRK to develop and disperse its program until only a full-scale conflict (or complete and unconditional inspections, which would become less and less likely as the pro-

45 William J. Perry, “Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations,” Oct. 12, 1999.

46 Cha, “Hawk Engagement and Preventive Defense,” p. 72.

47 David Stout, “Bush Says Libya Will Allow Arms Inspections,” *New York Times*, Dec. 19, 2003.

gram advanced) could eradicate it. Thus far a happy medium has been elusive, and it is speculation as to whether North Korea truly desires a settlement that would irreversibly terminate its WMD potential. This speculation, though, must be tested, since it is clearly by far the most desirable outcome. The Proliferation Security Initiative cannot possibly be infallible, and so the potential for North Korea to transfer plutonium to terrorists will be omnipresent, an extremely disturbing prospect. One would expect that the United States would pursue any and all avenues to avoid this nuclear “sword of Damocles,” even if the likelihood of transfer is extremely low. This makes the Bush Administration’s refusal to consider direct talks with North Korea particularly incomprehensible. The demand for multilateral participation is so strong that after Richard Armitage, the Deputy Secretary of State, suggested in Congressional testimony that bilateral negotiations were likely to take place, Bush directed that all U.S. officials no longer even publicly discuss the option of one-on-one talks.⁴⁸ This might be an acceptable stance if the United States had the upper hand in negotiations, but the harsh reality is that time is on North Korea’s side, and stonewalling will only allow its nuclear program to become further entrenched and therefore more difficult to dismantle and less likely to be willingly bargained away.

Past North Korean indiscretions and its violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework make the United States understandably reluctant to enter into another agreement that is not fully verifiable and permanent. However, even if the end goal is inflexible, the means toward achieving it must be. The Bush Administration’s rhetoric is not always the most conducive to positive relations and an atmosphere of compromise that may be indispensable to resolving the conflict. For instance, Assistant Secretary of State John Bolton’s now infamous speech in Seoul in July 2003 lambasted Kim Jong-Il as a tyrannical dictator and mentioned him by name 41 times.⁴⁹ President Bush has also personalized the issue, confiding to correspondent Bob Woodward that he

48 David E. Sanger, “U.S. Sees Quick Start of North Korean Nuclear Site,” *New York Times*, March 1, 2003.

49 John R. Bolton, “A Dictatorship at the Crossroads,” *Asian Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 1, 2003.

loathed Kim Jong-Il and had a “visceral reaction to [the] guy.”⁵⁰ According to an expert on Korean diplomacy, a negotiating style that denies personal contacts and makes offensive remarks such as these is antithetical to Korean notions of allowing an opponent to “save face” and retain honor.⁵¹ Another analyst has studied North Korean negotiating behavior and concludes that it follows a tit-for-tat strategy, meeting threats with threats and cooperation with cooperation, with obvious implications for a negative and combative U.S. approach.⁵² Even if such feelings are strongly held and fully justified, they have dubious value for diplomacy, especially when talks are at a standstill. This is not meant to imply that the United States is solely at fault—after all, North Korea has given its fair share of bombastic and threatening rhetoric—merely that it is worth considering whether a cycle of negative feedback is more responsible for poisoning relations than actual irreconcilable differences.

If the United States and North Korea truly have irreconcilable security interests, then no amount of talking, no matter how civil, will suffice to break the impasse. Along with flexibility over methods of negotiation, though, must come flexibility over the content of negotiations. This does not mean the United States should make unilateral concessions, but it should be forthcoming with a reasonable package of incentives to test North Korea’s willingness to trade away its nuclear program. It does not, for example, seem plausible to expect that North Korea would voluntarily disarm before receiving any guarantees of its security. As discussed in the intentions section, North Korea would be understandably loathe to trade-in a nuclear shield that thus far has proven quite effective for a paper shield based on a promise from its sworn enemy. The timing of this bargain, which seems quite favorable to the United States, should not be preventing its completion. Imagination on the terms of a compromise is essential; Michael O’Hanlon argues that since America’s allies do not want a coercive strategy, it should consider a grand package that would offer extensive aid and

50 Woodward, “A Course of ‘Confident Action.’”

51 Mazarr, *North Korea and the Bomb*, p. 207.

52 Leon V. Sigal, *Disarming Strangers: Nuclear Diplomacy with North Korea* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), p. 125.

security assurances in return for liberalization measures and a reduction in North Korea's military forces.⁵³ Regardless of the specific terms, a comprehensive offer must be put forward soon, since the demand for extra incentives will only grow as the DPRK program becomes more robust.

If form and content fail to achieve a settlement that results in the dismantlement of North Korea's nuclear programs, the United States will face some difficult choices. First, it will have to decide whether military action or a strategy of containment is appropriate to achieve this objective by force and coercive pressure. This decision carries an unmistakable risk of full-scale war on the Korean Peninsula, including perhaps attacks on Japan and the U.S. mainland, and so would be a remarkably risky enterprise. Whether to proceed would depend on an assessment of the likelihood of North Korean regional aggression or nuclear proliferation. To make this calculation as favorable as possible, the United States should make an unambiguous and public announcement to North Korea that any type of transfer will lead to the most severe of consequences. Establishing "red-lines" can be a dangerous business, but in this case the line should be very credible indeed. On the one hand, this arrangement could serve to inspire other nations to pursue WMD in order to achieve similar immunity from U.S. attack. On the other, it is undeniable that nuclear weapons are powerful tools of deterrence, and the desire to set a precedent and use North Korea as an example should not come at the cost of Seoul and countless thousands of lives. If anything, the North Korean situation should serve as a spur for the United States to make even greater efforts to come to some sort of arrangement with states like Iran and Syria, as it appears to have done with Libya. If those terms prove unacceptable, then the United States and its allies have no choice but to invest in counterproliferation and defensive technologies to disarm its foes by force or diminish the damage if war ever does break out.

With North Korea, the United States must make clear that any form of regional aggression or coercion will be fruitless, and any transfer of WMD technology or material will be met with a strong response.

It should attempt to reach a negotiated solution, in a professional and flexible manner, but be prepared for the consequences of failure. The Proliferation Security Initiative is not a satisfactory palliative, and should not lend any encouragement to the United States to dig in its heels and demand an agreement on its terms. It is North Korea that holds the advantage of effectively being on the defensive; it is the United States that has the last clear chance to avoid disaster. Fortunately the DPRK appears sensitive to deterrence, and willing to reach a negotiated resolution to the conflict. It would be a profound mistake not to make every effort to test this opportunity. If it proves to be a false hope, then the United States will be no worse for trying, save the lost time of negotiation.

⁵³ Michael O'Hanlon, "Think Bigger on North Korea," *Washington Post*, Sept. 17, 2003.