PLAN B FOR DEALING WITH NORTH KOREA

If North Korea refuses to give up its nuclear ambitions all palatable options will have run out, writes **Ted Galen Carpenter**

Throughout the current phase of the crisis involving North Korea's nuclear program—a phase that began in the autumn of 2002—the United States, nations of East Asia, and countries such as Australia have proceeded on the assumption that a diplomatic solution to the impasse is not only feasible but probable. The conventional wisdom is that such a settlement would entail Pyongyang's renunciation of its nuclear ambitions in exchange for diplomatic and economic concessions from the United States and other members of the six-party talks (Japan, South Korea, China, and Russia).

North Korean negotiators have not cooperated much during these talks, yet US and East Asian officials have, at least until recently, interpreted this belligerence as a manifestation of 'hard bargaining.' They hope that this is only a sign of the routine bluster and posturing that the North Koreans show during all negotiations but that the regime will ultimately see the advantage of their country being a non-nuclear state. Chinese officials have been the most inclined to embrace this thesis, with their counterparts in the United States, Russia, and South Korea being only a little less optimistic, as is Australia. Only Japanese policymakers have consistently remained sceptical about this approach.

The optimists may yet be vindicated. But what if the underlying assumption about an eventual diplomatic solution is wrong? What if Kim Jong-Il's regime is merely stalling for time while processing more plutonium from the Yongbyon reactor, building nuclear devices (perhaps even operational warheads), and perfecting a reliable missile delivery system? North Korea's periodic nuclear and missile tests, as well as recurrent withdrawals from the six-party talks, suggest that such a scenario cannot be dismissed. And over the past year or so, South Korean and US officials seem less confident than before about the prospects for an effective, enforceable agreement on the nuclear issue. This is especially true regarding Washington's explicit and ambitious goal of a 'complete, verifiable, and irreversible'[1] termination of Pyongyang's nuclear program. Even some members of China's foreign policy community now privately express worries that the North Koreans may be pursuing a delaying tactic.[2]

It is time to ask what the United States and North Korea's East Asian neighbours plan to do if Pyongyang does not abandon its nuclear ambitions. In other words, what is Plan B if the six-party talks fail? There appear to be only four options, and none is entirely appealing or without significant downsides.

Option 1: Use military force to eliminate North Korea's nuclear and missile programs.

This option can be, and should be, quickly ruled out. Fortunately, the Obama administration does not appear to be considering such a drastic

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step. It is sobering, though, that the Clinton administration definitely considered it during the 1993–94 nuclear crisis.[3] Hawkish figures in the United States, including Senator John McCain, floated the idea of using force when the current phase of the crisis emerged in late 2002 and early 2003.[4]

Military action against North Korea is far too dangerous. There is no certainty that US or South Korean intelligence agencies have even identified all of North Korea's nuclear facilities. We know about the Yongbyon complex, but there may well be installations—most likely buried deep underground—elsewhere in the country. Air strikes would only be partially effective and would torpedo any prospect of a diplomatic solution, while failing to eliminate North Korea's nuclear weapons capability.

Moreover, having seen what the United States did to Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong-Il would likely consider even limited air strikes as a prelude to a US-led campaign to overthrow his government. With nothing to lose, his probable response would be to go on the offensive against US and South Korean forces using North Korea's substantial conventional military capabilities. In addition to short- and medium-range missiles, Pyongyang has the ability to fire 300,000 artillery shells *an hour* into South Korea's capital, Seoul, where nearly half that country's population resides.

North Korea might also expand military operations to include attacks against other targets in South Korea and Japan, including US military bases in both countries. Any effort to solve the North Korean nuclear and missile problems through force runs the risk of triggering a general war on the Korean Peninsula and perhaps a war throughout Northeast Asia.

Option 2: Tighten sanctions and enforce the proliferation security initiative.

Former US ambassador to the United Nations John Bolton and other hardliners have suggested the option of imposing far stronger multilateral economic sanctions and using the Proliferation Security Initiative to intercept North Korean ships that might be carrying nuclear or missile materials. Following Pyongyang's nuclear test in 2009, the Obama administration decided to follow a milder version of the Bolton strategy and the UN Security Council has imposed a new round of sanctions.

Both elements of this approach have problems. Intercepting North Korean ships in international waters could well be considered an act of war under international law, especially by Pyongyang. So far, North Korea's bellicose rhetoric seems to be merely a bluff, but there is always the danger that Kim Jong-Il's regime might become serious in asserting its position, which could trigger a crisis.

The strategy of imposing tighter economic sanctions also faces major hurdles. Both Beijing and Moscow have consistently opposed vigorous sanctions in the UN Security Council, arguing that they will make Pyongyang less rather than more cooperative. The Russians and Chinese (particularly the latter) were successful in dramatically diluting the 2009 sanctions that the United States and Japan wanted.

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It is especially important to understand the reasons for China's reluctance to endorse truly robust sanctions. Although a few Sinophobes in the United States charge that China is in league with the North Koreans and would not mind a nuclear-armed North Korea, most evidence suggests that Beijing is not eager to see nuclear weapons introduced on the Korean Peninsula. Among other drawbacks, such a development may lead the Japanese to build nuclear deterrents of their own, which is the last thing China wants.

Maintaining the non-nuclear status quo on the Korean Peninsula may be a significant Chinese objective, but it is not their most important one.[5] Beijing's top priority is to preserve the North Korean state as a buffer between China and the US sphere of influence in Northeast Asia. Chinese leaders probably fear that rigorous

sanctions would increase the danger of the North Korean state imploding, much as East Germany did in 1989. Such a development could lead to a unified Korea allied to the United States right on China's doorsteps—probably with the continued presence of American military bases on the Korean Peninsula. It might lead to a massive flow of North Korean refugees into China. Uneasiness over these scenarios limits the amount of pressure that Beijing is willing to exert on Pyongyang.

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In theory, China might be able to use its economic leverage as North Korea's principal source of energy, food, and other vital commodities to compel Kim Jong Il's regime to halt its nuclear weapons program. Without Chinese cooperation, coercive economic measures would have little impact on Pyongyang. And given Washington's dependence on Beijing's willingness to continue funding the soaring US Treasury debt, American officials are not in a good bargaining position to pressure China into endorsing robust sanctions.

Even if harsher sanctions could be imposed, it's not clear that it would be a wise strategy. US leaders have always argued that North Korea faces a stark choice: abandon its quest for nuclear weapons and gradually become a normal member of the international community or face ever greater isolation. President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton have explicitly described the options in such binary terms.

But this strategy could prove to be quite dangerous. If isolation does not succeed in getting North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions, we may be faced with a troubling predicament. North Korea would still possess nuclear weapons, but its isolation would exacerbate strategic tensions in the region and increase the possibility of a fatal miscalculation. Imposing further economic sanctions on an already impoverished North Korea may also lead Pyongyang to seek revenues from other sources, especially by selling its missile and nuclear technologies to any paying state or non-state customer.

Moreover, Washington and its allies have used the isolation strategy against other 'breakout' nuclear powers without much success. The United States sought to get India and Pakistan to reverse course following their nuclear tests and the deployment of arsenals in the late 1990s. Those measures seem quaint today with US leaders actively seeking closer ties with both countries, raising questions about the long-term feasibility or wisdom of isolating new nuclear powers such as North Korea.

Option 3: Accept North Korea as a nuclear-weapons state and rely on deterrence to prevent aggressive behaviour.

The United States' successful deterrence of bad nuclear actors in the past, including the Soviet Union and Maoist China, lends credibility to this approach. The vast US strategic arsenal could probably deter the likes of Kim Jong-Il from attacking the American homeland. But this approach, although more practical and less risky than the previous two alternatives, is not without its own problems.

Being able to deter an outright attack on the United States would be relatively reliable, but the feasibility of deterring Pyongyang from using its new nuclear status to bully its neighbours is more doubtful. The credibility of extended deterrence—a great power using its nuclear arsenal to shield allies or clients from a nuclear-armed adversary—has always been a matter of some scepticism among security studies professionals. In this case, North Korean leaders might well wonder whether the United States would really risk war (including attacks on American targets in East Asia) merely to protect third parties. From the standpoint of American interests, preventing bullying behaviour in the immediate region should not be America's responsibility. In particular, it would seem more rational for Washington to adopt the view that it should be up to North Korea's prosperous and capable neighbours, especially Japan and South Korea, to defend themselves.

Even if extended deterrence proves reliable, it does not solve all the problems that a nuclear-

armed North Korea would pose. Relying on deterrence still leaves room for dangerous North Korean mischief in other respects. Pyongyang's proliferation activities are especially worrisome. North Korea's apparent nuclear assistance to Syria, and perhaps to Burma (Myanmar) as well, makes one wonder what other countries or non-state actors (which would be even more troubling) might benefit from such aid. Indeed, the prospect of Pyongyang becoming the supermarket to the world and selling nuclear technology, fissile material, and perhaps even operational nuclear warheads is more worrisome than the remote danger that North Korea would attack neighbouring countries or the United States. Dealing with a nuclear-armed North Korea would be, at the very least, a chronic and nerve-wracking experience for the rest of the world.

Option 4: Induce China to solve the problem—at a price.

The final option amounts to inducing China to actively undermine Kim Jong-Il's regime and orchestrate the emergence of a more pragmatic government in Pyongyang, along with the explicit condition of keeping the country non-nuclear. As part of the bargain, Beijing would also commit to the reunification of the two Koreas within the next generation.

If the price were right, it is at least possible that Chinese leaders might be bold enough to accept the risks involved in undermining Kim Jong-Il's regime and replacing it with a more moderate government—even though such a strategy could destabilise the North Korean state and allow events to spiral out of control. It has to be conceded, though, that China may not have enough influence in North Korea to carry out such a policy, even if Chinese leaders were willing to incur the risks.

Moreover, if Beijing were willing to make the attempt, the price in terms of concessions extracted from Washington would certainly not be cheap. At a minimum, Beijing would want the United States to end its military presence on the Korean Peninsula and, in all likelihood, to phase out its security alliance with Seoul. That would require the United States (and Japan) to accept a significant expansion of Chinese influence on the Korean Peninsula.

But to some extent, this is already happening. Trade between South Korea and China is expanding rapidly, and Seoul's policies on a variety of issues, including relations with Japan and the status of Taiwan, seem to align more with those of Beijing than the United States. The cozy relationship with China was more apparent during the previous left-leaning South Korean administration than under the current conservative president, Lee Myung-bak, but it is still substantial. Conversely, relations between Seoul and Washington have noticeably cooled over the past decade.[6] Although relations with America have improved under President Lee compared to Roh Moo-hyun's administration, US-South Korean ties are not what they were in earlier decades.

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In the future, South Korea—and even a united Korea—would likely to be fairly close to China diplomatically and economically. By offering incentives to Beijing to move against Kim Jong-Il's regime, the United States would at least get something important in return for relinquishing an already waning strategic and political asset.

Chinese leaders would likely seek US concessions on Taiwan too. At the least, Beijing would want the United States to cease selling arms to Taiwan. The intensity of the Chinese government's reaction to the relatively modest arms package that the Obama administration approved in January 2010 suggests just how salient this issue is for Beijing. Chinese leaders would probably press Washington to be more 'cooperative' in telling Taiwan that there is no realistic alternative to ultimate re-unification with the mainland.

Giving Beijing such concessions on Taiwan might well prove more difficult and painful than conceding on the Korean Peninsula. And there should be no rush to grant the Chinese government its maximum demands for taking a more proactive

position towards a disruptive and dangerous North Korea. Negotiations should be aimed at urging China to take decisive Chinese action for fewer concessions. At the same time, the nuclear crisis is urgent enough that US policymakers need to be flexible about their Taiwan policy in their negotiations with China.

For obvious reasons, making major geopolitical concessions to encourage China to be more forceful and proactive regarding the North Korean problem would not be easy for US policymakers. It would involve a tacit admission that China would henceforth be the most influential outside power with respect to Korean affairs, a development that would certainly not please Japan, Washington's principal ally in East Asia. It would also mean a measurable shift in the overall status and power positions of the United States and China in the region. Such a change would likely make all of China's neighbours somewhat nervous. Nevertheless, American—and East Asian—leaders must ask themselves whether such sacrifices might be the necessary price they have to pay to end the North Korean nuclear threat.

In any case, US and East Asian officials need to think about a Plan B *now*. It is not a prudent strategy simply to hope that the six-party talks will produce an enforceable, effective solution. Given North Korea's record, that is merely the triumph of hope over experience.

Endnotes

1 The phrase was used by then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Adnaan Wasey 'North Korea agrees to halt nuclear program,' PBS NewsHour Extra (14 February 2007).

2 Author's conversations with various Chinese scholars and policymakers (Shanghai: June 2009). Such expressions of uncertainty—even outright suspicions—regarding North Korea's intentions were in marked contrast to the prevailing view a year earlier. Author's conversations with various Chinese scholars and policymakers (Beijing and Shanghai: April 2008).

3 Ashton B. Carter and William J. Perry, 'Back to the brink,' *The Washington Post* (20 October 2002). Carter and Perry were both prominent officials in the Clinton administration (Perry as Secretary of Defense), so their admission that the administration seriously considered military strikes is especially troubling.

4 John McCain, 'Rogue state rollback,' *Weekly Standard* (20 January 2003).

5 For a discussion of the complex dynamics underlying China's policy toward North Korea, see Ted Galen Carpenter, 'Great expectations: Washington, Beijing, and the North Korean nuclear crisis,' *Korean Journal of Defense Analysis* 18:4 (Winter 2006–07).

6 For an earlier discussion of that growing estrangement, see Ted Galen Carpenter and Doug Bandow, *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), especially 30–37.