

All the Players at the Table A Multilateral Solution to the North Korean Nuclear Crisis

by Doug Bandow

Executive Summary

There is no easy answer to the prospect of a nuclear Democratic People's Republic of Korea. A preemptive war against Pyongyang, even if the strikes were initially directed only at the North's nuclear facilities, would create an unacceptable risk of full-scale war on the peninsula. Sanctions would create their own set of risks. Current punitive economic measures have increased the suffering of millions of North Koreans but have not succeeded in altering President Kim Jong-il's behavior. Further sanctions would certainly not work without the support of the surrounding countries.

Multilateral negotiations and pressure from the four regional powers—China, Japan, Russia, and South Korea—offer the best hope of forestalling North Korean production and sale of nuclear weapons. A regional approach will force Washington to consider the wishes of the

DPRK's neighbors, none of whom is eager to destabilize the North. The Bush administration should be willing to cooperate with the other regional powers.

Given that the North Korean nuclear program poses a far greater threat to the DPRK's neighbors than to the United States, the United States should demand that those countries become involved in developing a multilateral solution. Each country may have different reasons for wanting to resolve the crisis peacefully, and the Bush administration has hoped that those considerations would encourage each party to come to the table. But Washington should do more than hope. Policymakers should structure their diplomatic efforts to highlight the mutual interests at stake in the crisis. The United States, in the process, should begin reducing its profile in the region.

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Introduction

Ever since learning that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea had embarked on a program to build nuclear weapons, the United States has weighed a range of policy options. While preparing for a conflict in the Middle East, the Bush administration tried to ignore North Korea's nuclear saber rattling. It studiously avoided characterizing the DPRK's actions as a crisis, and it attempted to draw regional actors, especially the Republic of Korea, China, and Japan, into taking a more active role. In response, the North demanded bilateral talks with the United States, and South Korea offered to act as a mediator between the two parties. Only after the end of major military operations in Iraq did China broker talks between Washington and Pyongyang; those talks ended after a few short days without a breakthrough.

The Bush administration's policy choices are limited, and even the most promising alternatives hold out little hope for altering Pyongyang's course of action. The most dangerous option—the use of military force against North Korea—would likely result in a devastating war, threatening the lives of hundreds of thousands. Given that the North Korean nuclear program poses a far greater risk to the DPRK's neighbors than to the United States, Washington should demand that those countries become involved in developing a multilateral solution. The United States, in the process, should begin reducing its profile in the region.¹

The Limits and Perils of Unilateral Action

Some commentators have argued for unilateral military action against North Korea's nuclear facilities. Even as talks were beginning with the DPRK in Beijing in mid-April, the French press agency cited an Australian report that the Pentagon had drawn up plans

to destroy both the Yongbyon reactor and the artillery located along the demilitarized zone (DMZ).² At the same time, Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), normally thought of as a moderate, declared that military action “always has to be there as a very strong possibility.”³ More ominous, John Bolton, undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, urged the North to “draw the appropriate lesson from Iraq that the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction” is not in its national interest.⁴ Policymakers and pundits alike argued that America's quick military success in ousting Saddam Hussein in Iraq had caused North Korea to blink and agree to multilateral talks that included China.⁵

However, the risks of preventive military action far outweigh the potential benefits. There is no guarantee that a U.S. strike would take out all of Pyongyang's facilities and materials. An attack could release radioactive emissions over the North's neighbors. And, most important, the likely result of any attempt at preemption would be general war on the Korean peninsula.⁶

Ironically, the simple threat of preemption may have impeded resolution of the crisis. Alexander Losyukov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, concluded that “the Iraq situation, unfortunately, is prompting the North Koreans to strengthen their defenses” and encouraging them to build nuclear weapons.⁷ Pyongyang itself announced that the Iraq war showed that only a “tremendous military deterrent force powerful enough to decisively beat back an attack . . . can avert a war and protect the security of the country” and that “even the signing of a non-aggression treaty with the US would not help avert a war.”⁸

Attempts at lesser levels of coercion by the United States also would be controversial and risky. Former secretary of state James Baker calls for “complete economic and political isolation.”⁹ Over the objection of South Korea, the United States pushed the International Atomic Energy Agency to forward the issue of the North's noncompliance to the UN

Security Council, which could issue a warning or move directly to economic sanctions. So far, China and Russia have refused to approve any action. Pyongyang has threatened to regard sanctions as a declaration of war.¹⁰

Whether sanctions would work is another question. North Korea remains one of the world's most isolated countries, but it is weaker and more vulnerable than it was a decade ago.¹¹ It is more heavily reliant than ever on outside support—aid, remittances, and trade—and thus is susceptible to economic pressure. Nevertheless, sanctions usually hurt the poor, vulnerable, and powerless the most—not their rulers. Increased suffering would be decisive only if it emboldened the disorganized and disheartened rural masses to revolt—which is unlikely—or inconvenienced a critical faction of the Communist Party and military—which is only slightly more plausible. Believing that another squeeze would bring the regime to heel probably represents the triumph of hope over experience.

Moreover, sanctions would not work without the support of the surrounding countries. For instance, the DPRK has only six flights a week to other nations; five are to either China or Russia (Bangkok is the sixth). Trade and aid are overwhelmingly dominated by China, South Korea, and Japan. The effectiveness of sanctions would rise or fall on the basis of those nations' cooperation.

Regional Concerns

Any multilateral approach to pressuring the North to abandon its nuclear program will force Washington to consider the wishes of the DPRK's neighbors, none of whom is eager to destabilize the North. The ROK is most strongly opposed. War on the peninsula would wreak devastation. The mere threat of war, President Roh Moo-hyun complains, "would become an unstable factor for the Korean economy."¹² Seoul also worries about impeding improved ROK-DPRK relations and business opportunities.¹³

Moreover, any measure that encouraged the collapse of the DPRK could spark internal armed conflict that might spill into the ROK. Even absent violence, refugees would undoubtedly flood south. It was widely reported that a South Korean official told Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage during meetings in February that his country would "prefer a nuclear North Korea to a collapsed North Korea."¹⁴ South Korean officials denied those reports, but other evidence suggests that the ROK is seeking accommodation with the North.¹⁵

In fact, the South fears immediate peaceful reunification almost as much as war. It watched German reunification with horror, recognizing that a similar enterprise on the Korean peninsula would be extraordinarily costly. Goldman Sachs Group Inc. figured that the cost of "fixing" the DPRK would run up to one trillion dollars, more than West Germany spent on reunification with East Germany.¹⁶ Given that West Germany and East Germany were wealthier than South Korea and North Korea, respectively, Korean reunification would be a crushing burden on the ROK. One estimate is that the price of absorbing the North, whose per capita gross domestic product is little more than 3 percent that of South Korea, would reduce the living standard in the ROK by 10 percent.¹⁷ For understandable reasons, the goal of President Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy" was not only to reduce the chance of conflict; it was to help the North muddle along and reduce the cost of eventual reunification.

There is another consideration, which is seldom voiced publicly. If the North Korean regime were doomed, any nuclear arsenal would fall into the hands of the South through reunification. And inheriting nuclear weapons is a lot easier than building them.¹⁸ In fact, a popular new South Korean novel, *The Rose of Sharon Has Blossomed*, centers around a South Korean aiding the North in building nuclear weapons that are used jointly to defeat Japanese aggression.¹⁹

The threat of a unified Korea with nuclear weapons should therefore be of major concern for the Japanese, but Tokyo has said lit-

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tle about the recent crisis. The Japanese fear pushing Pyongyang toward war and tend to tread lightly when confronting Japan's large, pro-DPRK ethnic Korean population. So far Tokyo remains reluctant to back sanctions.²⁰

China shares many of the ROK's concerns about instability in the Korean peninsula, particularly an increased flow of refugees into China's border provinces, already heavily populated by ethnic Koreans. (There have been an estimated 200,000 North Koreans living illegally in China's northeast, though a recent crackdown has repatriated many of them.) Xu Wenji of Jilin University in Changchun, China, noted that while America was far away, "this is our neighbor and any disturbance on the Korean Peninsula has a profound effect on China."²¹

Russia may have the least directly at stake. However, instability and war would threaten economic ties to the South; voting for sanctions would wreck Moscow's relationship with Pyongyang; and destruction of the North Korean regime would strengthen U.S. influence at Russia's eastern door. None of those results is desirable in Russia's eyes.

The approval of both Beijing and Moscow, which both opposed taking the issue to the Security Council, would be necessary for sanctions to take effect. "We don't believe that it is an appropriate time for the U.N. Security Council to get involved," said Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Zhang Qiyue after the IAEA pushed the nuclear issue forward earlier this year.²² Russia also criticized moving the issue to the Security Council. At the behest of Britain, France, and the United States, the Security Council finally addressed the problem in early April. But Chinese and Russian opposition prevented the body from adopting a statement even criticizing Pyongyang.²³ The cooperation of South Korea and Japan also would be necessary to enforce sanctions.

Multilateral Negotiations

Given the risks of war and problems with sanctions, multilateral negotiations are the

obvious place to start. Pyongyang is playing the game of brinkmanship; the DPRK is threatening to build nukes, not to use them. The North claims to want to resolve the issue peacefully. An official statement declared:

It is the consistent stand of the DPRK to settle the issue on an equal footing through fair negotiations that may clear both sides of their concerns. We have already clarified that the DPRK is ready to solve the nuclear issue through negotiations on condition that the U.S. recognizes the DPRK's sovereignty, assures it of nonaggression and does not obstruct its economic development.²⁴

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An early attempt to test the claim, perhaps, occurred in mid-April when the United States and North Korea held three days of talks in the presence of Chinese representatives. Those meetings were merely the beginning of what is likely to be a lengthy process. North Korea threatened to test nuclear weapons or export plutonium depending on America's actions; the DPRK representative told Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly, "It's up to you." Secretary of State Colin Powell responded that the United States would not be "intimidated by bellicose statements or by threats or actions they think might get them more attention or might force us to make a concession that we would not otherwise make." President George W. Bush contended that the North Koreans were "back to the old blackmail game."²⁵

But Pyongyang's hard-line stance is consistent with its past behavior. The North has long mixed conciliation and provocation in dealing with Washington and its allies.²⁶ The North Koreans must enter into negotiations with the understanding that the process will be both tortuous and torturous, with nearly as many retreats as advances. At the same time, only skilled diplomacy offers even the faint hope of limiting the North's presumed nuclear arsenal.

Michelle Ciarrocca of the World Policy Institute recommends beginning with “the principles behind the 1994 agreed framework agreement—political recognition and economic assistance to Pyongyang in exchange for verifiable steps to dismantle and terminate its nuclear weapons and ballistic missile programs.”²⁷ A 1999 State Department study by former secretary of defense William Perry suggested extending the Agreed Framework to other nuclear weapons activities and ballistic missiles, seeking the “complete and verifiable cessation” of the nuclear and missile programs.²⁸ Also in 1999, a National Defense University study group recommended the same sort of “more for more” program.²⁹ Jon Wolfsthal, deputy director of the Carnegie Endowment’s Non-Proliferation Project, takes a similar position.³⁰ Losyukov presented another variant, trading security guarantees and aid for the end of Pyongyang’s nuclear program.³¹

Broadly speaking, this appears to be the administration strategy—a broader accord on more issues combined with dismantlement of existing nuclear facilities.³² Powell criticized the Agreed Framework for leaving “intact the capacity for production.”³³ Although Washington has proposed to eliminate any more money for the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization, a U.S.-funded entity created under the Agreed Framework to provide fuel oil and construct two light-water reactors in the North, the Bush administration holds out the possibility of adding money if an agreement is reached.³⁴ There also seems to be broad U.S. public support for a verifiable negotiated settlement growing out of the Agreed Framework.³⁵

The operative word is “verifiable,” however, since Pyongyang has cheated before and there’s no reason to believe that it would not do so again.³⁶ And verification would not be easy. Henry Sokolski of the Nonproliferation Policy Education Center wants the DPRK to begin by tearing down its nuclear plants and turning over its accumulated fuel rods.³⁷ Intrusive inspections would be a must, something Pyongyang would surely be hesitant to

accept. But the North’s ambassador to Moscow, Pak Ui-chun, has said that his country might permit Washington to “check to prove that we aren’t building nuclear weapons” as part of a broader agreement.³⁸

Some analysts would push for even more. Perry suggested adding to the agenda demobilization and withdrawal of the DPRK’s conventional units from their advanced positions near the DMZ.³⁹ A group of human rights activists, along with former Central Intelligence Agency director R. James Woolsey, proposes responding positively to North Korea’s demand for negotiations “on condition that Pyongyang agrees to negotiate over allowing institutions that promote such human rights as the free exchange of people, religious liberty, open borders and family reunification.”⁴⁰ Those are worthy goals, but each condition that Washington attempts to include that is distasteful to the DPRK makes an agreement less likely. Everything must be balanced against achieving the overriding objective: halting the North’s nuclear program.

Even if successful, the result of diplomacy might not be the kind of clear-cut victory that Washington has come to expect. It almost certainly would require a U.S. promise not to attack the North.⁴¹ Providing any foreign aid carrots might appear to involve “appeasement” and “reward” an outlaw regime. One analyst compares aid to paying “tribute” to the Barbary Pirates.⁴² There is, of course, a difference between attacking American ships and enslaving U.S. sailors and simply building weapons of the sort already possessed by Washington. In the first case, the bribe is to forestall what the transgressor has no right to do; in the second, it is to win cooperation that the party is not obligated to provide.

South Korea’s Role

Given the stakes, South Korea is likely to insist that it be not only consulted but involved in shaping policy. The ROK’s exclusion from the Beijing talks in mid-April gen-

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erated significant domestic criticism in South Korea of Roh Moo-hyun's government.⁴³ Although Washington promised to represent Seoul's viewpoint, South Korean foreign minister Yoon Young-kwan announced, "We won't share the burden resulting from any talks that we do not participate in."⁴⁴ Seoul's refusal to issue a blank check is understandable. Observes Suh Jin-young, a professor of international studies at Korea University, "The biggest problem here is that we have no idea what the Bush administration is willing to offer."⁴⁵

North Korea seemed to sense the divergence between the two allies; it offered to restart ministerial talks with the South even as it prepared to sit down with the United States. China, Japan, and Russia should also be willing to cooperate in pressuring the North to drop its nuclear program. They have obvious interests to protect. Moreover, they are concerned about Washington's agenda and competence. Says Desaix Anderson, former head of the light-water reactor project in Pyongyang: "None of the surrounding powers wants a nuclear-armed Korea. But they also do not want confrontation caused by inept diplomacy from Washington."⁴⁶ Involving those nations is certainly in America's interest. As Shi Yin hong, a professor at China's People's University argues, it "is highly doubtful" that Washington alone can end the North's nuclear ambitions—peacefully, anyway.⁴⁷

Accordingly, America should continue downplaying the crisis in an attempt to move off center stage. First, the United States should, without fanfare, end current aid of any sort to the DPRK. When the Bush administration announced in January 2003 that it would ship no more grain to North Korea until it had better assurances that the food was being delivered to the hungry populace, and not just the military, many observers interpreted that policy change as a form of pressure.⁴⁸ The United States and the European Union announced the resumption of food aid to the DPRK in March, and South Korea pledged to provide 1.3 million tons of rice to the North over a three-year period.⁴⁹

From a humanitarian standpoint, cutting off food shipments is the most difficult decision, since potentially hundreds of thousands of lives are at stake. But Washington should not discourage the ROK, Japan, China, or the UN from stepping in.⁵⁰ Rather, it should indicate that, although it is willing to discuss all issues pertaining to America's relationship with the North, it cannot provide assistance while Pyongyang is acting in such a provocative manner. The Bush administration should also correct the mistaken notion that American taxpayers are responsible for providing humanitarian assistance to a tyrannical regime that starves its people while building nuclear weapons. Indeed, Washington should explain that it recognizes that, as Kim Jong-il told a Russian traveling companion, "Many countries just exaggerate their disasters to get more aid from the international community."⁵¹

That stance would reduce the value of the North's nuclear card while moving toward a solution. It is obvious that the North's concern with the United States transcends food. The insistence about meeting with Washington points to a focus on security and, in a larger sense, respect, which none of the other regional players can provide. Argues Don Oberdorfer, journalist in residence at the School of Advanced International Studies, who visited Pyongyang in November 2002, "I had the distinct impression that they would settle for something well short of the nonaggression treaty they requested, if a credible assurance of their security was presented in some high-level fashion."⁵²

It is the presumed security threat posed by the United States to the DPRK that explains Pyongyang's fixation on Washington. South Korean spokesman Rhee Bong-jo reported that, during intra-Korean negotiations in late January 2003, "North Korea kept contending that this nuclear issue should be resolved through dialogue with the United States."⁵³ In fact, Pyongyang has claimed that "the only way of solving the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula, peacefully and in a most fair way, is for the DPRK and the U.S. to hold

direct and equal negotiations.” After visits by Australian and Russian diplomats, the North announced that other states, “do not need to poke their nose into” the issue.⁵⁴ Even Cambodia, which has long had a close relationship with the North, announced plans in early April to send an envoy to North Korea to urge Pyongyang to show more flexibility.⁵⁵ Pyongyang has also discouraged involvement by Seoul: the issue “cannot be resolved by South Koreans,” said Cho Chung-han, an official with the DPRK’s Committee for the Peaceful Reunification of the Fatherland.⁵⁶ At the end of January 2003, a South Korean delegation visiting Pyongyang was denied its hoped-for meeting with Kim Jong-il to discuss the issue.⁵⁷ The April talks also excluded the ROK.

North Korean intransigence on this score must not be allowed to stand. Given that South Korea is directly threatened by the North’s nuclear program, it is entirely appropriate—indeed, it is essential—that the South be involved in negotiations.

Other Regional Players

Equally important would be a coordinated response from all of the North’s neighbors, particularly China, Japan, and Russia. Obviously, their views on many regional issues, including Korean reunification and American dominance, differ, sometimes substantially.⁵⁸ However, none wants war on the peninsula; none wants a nuclear North Korea; all possess some degree of leverage over Pyongyang. So far all parties, including the North’s closest partners, China and Russia, have attempted to dampen the burgeoning confrontation between Washington and Pyongyang.⁵⁹

But the United States cannot take their support for granted, and Washington must work to ensure that Beijing, Moscow, and Tokyo, as well as Seoul, are all involved in a multilateral solution. The *Wall Street Journal* may accuse the DPRK of attempting “to use nuclear weapons to blackmail the world,” but

apparently most of the world doesn’t feel as threatened as does the United States.⁶⁰ Policymakers in Washington need to remind the international community—particularly the four leading powers in East Asia—that the North poses a far greater threat to their interests. For now, each country has different reasons for wanting to downplay the threat posed by the North.

Japan

Relations between North Korea and Japan appeared to be improving in mid-2002. In September 2002 Japanese prime minister Junichiro Koizumi met Kim Jong-Il in a dramatic summit, which occurred despite Washington’s ill-concealed displeasure. At the summit, Kim apologized for repeated abductions of Japanese citizens by North Korea (the kidnap victims were apparently used to teach North Korean agents Japanese language and culture). Kim’s apology was an unexpected gesture toward reconciliation—indeed, a shocking admission by the near-divine ruler of a state that has always maintained the infallibility of its leadership.

Alas, Pyongyang’s explanation of the abductions was incomplete and actually served to exacerbate Japanese suspicions. The North claimed that 13 Japanese had been kidnapped, but only 5 remained alive. Japanese officials wondered how the 8 other abductees died so young.⁶¹ The North allowed the 5 kidnap victims to visit Japan, but without their families; Tokyo barred their return and demanded the release of the families as well. Talks over recognition and aid, initially expected to be simple, were called off amid mutual acrimony.⁶²

The Japanese remain fixated on the emotionally explosive issue, but that should not cloud their strategic judgment. Since Japan is an obvious target of North Korean wrath, and has begun to exhibit signs of foreign policy independence, it has a strong incentive to respond to Pyongyang. Unfortunately, however, so far Japan has done little in the aftermath of North Korea’s nuclear revelations. Tokyo is, explain Doug Struck and Sachiko

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Sakamaki of the *Washington Post*, "largely watching from the sideline."⁶³ Washington should be sensitive to Japan's concerns, but, despite the obvious and understandable emotional power of the kidnapping issue, the DPRK's nuclear program poses a far greater threat to Japan's future, and Tokyo has substantial clout. It is one of the North's top three trading partners (along with China and South Korea) and is the source of substantial remittances (variously estimated in the tens or hundreds of millions of dollars annually) from Korean Japanese loyal to the North. Moreover, Japan has long been expected to offer between \$5 billion and \$10 billion in aid to North Korea as part of any recognition deal.⁶⁴

There are some welcome hints that Japan is taking the threat seriously. Tokyo has a military option, despite historical and constitutional complications. The most obvious response is missile defense, presumably in conjunction with the United States.⁶⁵ As noted below, Japan is capable of creating nuclear weapons itself. And Tokyo's Defense Agency chief has even suggested that a preemptive strike against North Korean missile sites could be considered legitimate self-defense.⁶⁶ In fact, Defense Minister Shigeru Ishiba said, "Our nation will use military force as a self-defense measure if [Pyongyang] starts to resort to arms against Japan," which he defined as the moment the North began to fuel its missiles.⁶⁷ His statement and North Korea's stance have helped spark a wider debate about enhancing Japanese military capabilities, particularly the acquisition of anti-missile technologies and possibly an offensive capability to preempt an attack.⁶⁸

Russia

China and Russia have offered the United States tepid backing at best; both have criticized proposals for coercion, pointed to America's responsibility for resolving the crisis, and recognized Pyongyang's need for security guarantees.⁶⁹ Russia is less likely to be directly threatened by a nuclearized Korean peninsula but would not benefit from

increased instability in the North. Indeed, Moscow's attitude might be gleaned from reports (formally denied by Moscow) that its agents in the DPRK assisted the United States by installing nuclear detection equipment and briefing Washington on the results.⁷⁰ Russia has been cooperative in the war on terrorism, but relations have soured markedly over its opposition to the Bush administration's war on Iraq. Thus, while Moscow has publicly pressed the North to resolve the nuclear crisis, some analysts complain that the pressure has not been serious.⁷¹

But Moscow's influence is limited. Complains Viktor Pavlyatenko of the Russian Academy of Science: "Even in the Soviet era, North Korea did what it wanted without consulting us. It would attack a US ship and we would only hear about it from Washington."⁷² But some South Koreans have suggested that Russia could offer to supply the North with natural gas from Sakhalin Island or Siberia. Moreover, Moscow could change its position on UN sanctions. In fact, as the Beijing negotiations approached, the Putin government seemed to be rethinking its opposition. Explained Losyukov, "Russia will have to seriously consider its position, as the appearance of nuclear weapons in North Korea and the possibility of using them close to our borders goes categorically against Russia's natural interest." He added that his nation's opposition to sanctions would continue only "as long as our North Korean colleagues maintain common sense."⁷³

China

China could play the most important role in dissuading the North from continuing with its nuclear program. Beijing has emphasized the importance of U.S.-DPRK bilateral negotiations in response to U.S. efforts to involve regional powers and members of the UN Security Council, but its willingness to host the meeting in April suggests some flexibility. China has little to fear directly from the prospect of a nuclear DPRK, despite some talk of the North's turning on its one-

time patron.⁷⁴ Still, it is not in China's interest for North Korea to destabilize the peninsula, inviting U.S. military action or the spread of nuclear weapons to other neighboring states, most obviously Japan. A race by East Asian nations to develop independent nuclear deterrents could extend to Taiwan. Fear of regional instability is the prime reason Beijing is thought to have rejected Pyongyang's proposals for military along with economic aid.

Yet some people have charged that Beijing has encouraged—if not induced—Pyongyang to create the current crisis. At the very least, some believe that the Chinese will do nothing to help resolve the controversy.⁷⁵ They do retain considerable influence; for example, columnist Joel Mowbray notes that the PRC provides 80 percent of the North's energy needs, but he complains that the Chinese "haven't even tried to exploit that leverage."⁷⁶ Administration officials have been slightly more restrained in their rhetoric but can scarcely hide their frustration.⁷⁷ And, at least up until the April talks, China had been only marginally helpful, despite Beijing's claims to the contrary.⁷⁸

There are good reasons for Beijing to be disinclined to solve what the Chinese see as primarily America's problem, however. First, China seems to lack the North's full trust, even if it could apply significant economic pressure. Moreover, China is understandably suspicious of Washington's apparent determination to remain the dominant power along its borders, promoting, in fact if not in name, a policy of containment.⁷⁹ In the short term North Korea's brinkmanship has sparked greater criticism by China of Washington's focus on Iraq; in the long term the controversy, by creating trouble and strengthening America's adversaries, may, in the view of the PRC's leadership, help contain the world's hyper-power. Concludes analyst Stephen Richter: "The North Korean crisis is helping to chip away at U.S. credibility in the world and it is even leading to tensions between the United States and its allies in Asia, such as South Korea and Japan. All that suits China just fine."⁸⁰

However, the most basic problem is that the PRC apparently does not feel threatened and is thus less willing to use its influence.⁸¹ Indeed, Beijing still helps the North when such cooperation is in China's interest—for example, by returning would-be refugees to certain punishment by the Kim regime in order to help stem the flow of unwanted immigrants.⁸² U.S. officials complain of the Chinese, "They're carrying Pyongyang's water instead of ours."⁸³ But this begs the question: why should Beijing see the need to aid Washington? There is ample justification for China to act in its own self-interest, not out of courtesy to the United States. Washington should emphasize these considerations in attempting to gain support for multilateral action.

The PRC's standoffish attitude similarly irritates some South Korean officials, one of whom complained that the Chinese "don't look at the nuclear issue as the biggest issue. Their main goal is to help North Korea get stronger."⁸⁴ That complaint seems somewhat disingenuous as it mirrors the preference of many in Seoul—to allow the North to get stronger on the assumption that, after reunification, the combined entity will achieve regional power status.

No nation readily works against its perceived interest. And there is evidence that China began to take a more active role in trying to resolve the nuclear crisis in early 2003. The Bush administration lavishly praised Beijing's role in encouraging the mid-April talks, even though the results were meager at best.⁸⁵ Moreover, the PRC emphasized that Pyongyang need not make concessions so long as it continued talks.⁸⁶ Yet there are reports that China temporarily cut off oil shipments for "technical" reasons in March and told the North to halt its provocations.⁸⁷ Moreover, there were indications that North Korea's assertion during the Beijing negotiations that it possessed nuclear weapons disappointed China and made the latter more willing to pressure Pyongyang. An unnamed senior Bush administration official told the *Washington Post* that the negotiations in

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Beijing “turned into a debacle” for the Chinese, because “the problem of nuclear weapons in the Korean Peninsula is more concrete that they thought before.” Another official told the *Post* that the Chinese “were insulted by the North Koreans.”⁸⁸ Shi Yinhong, an international relations expert at the People’s University in Beijing, called the North’s behavior at the Beijing summit “a major slap in the face to China” and suggested that China might “consider whether it needs to take a new approach to the North Korean problem, including the possibility of stepping up the pressure.”⁸⁹

Bringing Regional Powers to the Table

The key to enlisting Russia and, most important, China is Washington’s effort to convince them that they will help themselves by exerting themselves. One tactic would be to tell them “that by failing to support us they put their relations with us at risk,” writes Stephen Sestanovich of the Council on Foreign Relations.⁹⁰ That might or might not work, but only at great cost, given the many other issues—from Iraq, to nonproliferation, to Taiwan, to the war on terrorism—that are also at stake in those relationships.⁹¹ Better would be to point out the adverse consequences to them as well as America if Pyongyang does not desist. Given proper direction, one can hope, as Adam Garfinkle of the *National Interest*, writing in *National Review Online*, put it, that the Chinese end up cooperating because they “may ultimately put their own national interest above habit.”⁹²

But policymakers in Washington should do more than hope: they should structure their diplomatic efforts to highlight the mutual interests at stake in the North Korean nuclear crisis. The United States, with the inadvertent aid of Pyongyang, may already have achieved that result. L. Gordon Flake of the Mansfield Center for Pacific Affairs claims that at the mid-April talks

“North Korea fell right into a trap and did what the administration expected it to do.”⁹³ That is, the DPRK’s belligerence at negotiations hosted by China may encourage the latter to back America’s position.

Nuclear Proliferation in East Asia

Washington also should dramatically demonstrate the downside to Beijing if the North moves ahead. That means telling Pyongyang that proliferation is not likely to stop with North Korea. Maintaining a permanent nuclear umbrella over the South and Japan would unnecessarily keep the United States entangled in a dangerous situation potentially forever. But the likelihood of the North’s attempting to strike the United States, given current missile capabilities, is quite small, and the credibility of the U.S. extended deterrent is therefore weak. It would be better to warn Pyongyang that more aggressive behavior on its part will encourage both Japan and South Korea to respond in kind; North Korea could find itself confronting not one but two new nuclear powers, neither of which would be kindly disposed to the DPRK.⁹⁴ Both are capable of going nuclear; Japan could do so quickly, within months or a year, by some estimates, whereas South Korea, which lacks a reprocessing plant, would require more time, absent outside assistance.⁹⁵ And there is at least some sentiment for just such a course of action: South Korean assemblyman Park Jin wondered, “If North Korea says it has nuclear weapons, . . . why shouldn’t we have the same?”⁹⁶

However, Washington need not push its allies to deploy nuclear weapons; it simply needs to withdraw its objection to their doing so.⁹⁷ The threat is useful even if Washington or its friends ultimately draw back from such a policy. The threat also is useful even if the North brushes it off, since Pyongyang’s primary concern is deterring an American attack.⁹⁸ The mere prospect of

Japan's acquiring nuclear weapons would likely spur China to engage Pyongyang more seriously. While the PRC might fear North Korea's collapse more than its acquisition of nuclear weapons, it would also fear a fully armed Japan that could become a peer competitor to the PRC in the region. In fact, the issue is so obvious that America need only hint that it might revise its position and Beijing would be forced to consider the potential consequences immediately.

Obviously, such a step would be controversial—in the United States, South Korea, and Japan and throughout Asia.⁹⁹ The principle fear of proliferation is that nuclear weapons would empower Pyongyang to bully its neighbors. But the recognition by the DPRK that it could not do so would reduce one of the major incentives for the North to build a nuclear arsenal.

John Endicott of the Georgia Institute of Technology and James Goodby of the Brookings Institution predict that “a disastrous war could quickly follow” a nuclear test explosion by the DPRK, without explaining how or why it is likely to occur.¹⁰⁰ The most common fear is that of “a massive arms race,” in the words of Ryoo Kihl-jae at Seoul's Kyungham University.¹⁰¹ Neoconservatives Robert Kagan and William Kristol are even more frightened:

The possibility that Japan, and perhaps even Taiwan, might respond to North Korea's actions by producing their own nuclear weapons, thus spurring an East Asian nuclear arms race to match the South Asian nuclear arms race between India and Pakistan, is something that should send chills up the spine of any sensible American strategist.¹⁰²

But why? Kagan and Kristol have long tagged China as a likely American adversary. Why not encourage Washington's democratic friends to develop the means to deter adversaries? It seems that Kagan and Kristol favor the United States, and only the United

States, spending substantial resources on the military and risking war to protect allied interests. Yet, if Beijing has nuclear weapons, why not democratic Tokyo, Seoul, and Taipei? Indeed, such a course might merely speed up the inevitable. In coming years Washington, along with its defense dependents Japan and Taiwan, is likely to feel increasingly uncomfortable with an America tasked to shield them from an increasingly assertive China. The United States will fear being drawn into an unnecessary war; Taipei and Tokyo will fear America's refusing to be drawn in; and the credibility of the U.S. extended nuclear deterrent will be steadily eroded.

Fears of nuclear proliferation in East Asia are largely overblown. Allowing allied states to develop their own independent deterrent may well be in all parties' interest. True, Michael Hirsh of *Newsweek* worries that “nothing is likelier to make China rush into an arms race—it is now only slowly building up its forces—than a nuclear-armed Japan.”¹⁰³ Yet even worse is a power vacuum in which a vulnerable Japan is forced to rely on America in any dispute with a nuclear-armed China. And what is more chilling than having to risk Los Angeles to protect Taipei?

It is precisely that fear of an arms race in East Asia that might prompt China to exert pressure on the DPRK to halt its nuclear program. If North Korea proceeds with its nuclear program despite multilateral pressure, a second round of proliferation, this one to America's democratic allies, might not be perfect. But it would be better than the alternative. As Adam Garfinkle explains, “If North Korea becomes a six-or-more-weapon nuclear power, we will be far away, with deterrence reasonably intact, and with a decent if imperfect ability to prevent North Korea from exporting fissile materials and missiles.”¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

The prospects of a nuclear-armed North Korea have forced policymakers on both

Allowing allied states to develop their own independent deterrent may well be in all parties' interest.

Multilateral negotiations and pressure offer the best hope of forestalling North Korean production of nuclear weapons.

sides of the Pacific to confront some uncomfortable scenarios. A preemptive attack on the North, even if the strikes were initially directed only at the DPRK's nuclear facilities, would create an unacceptable risk of full-scale war on the peninsula. Such a conflict almost certainly would yield far more death and destruction than Washington's relatively easy conquest of Iraq. Sanctions would create their own set of risks and would not likely be effective, at least not without the support of the North's neighbors.

Multilateral negotiations and pressure offer the best hope of forestalling North Korean production, and especially sale, of nuclear weapons. And if that strategy fails, the United States should rely on deterrence to protect its interests, while placing on the DPRK's neighbors responsibility for their defense. Washington's dominant role in Northeast Asia was unnecessary when the North's threats were limited to conventional forces. That entanglement will be equally unnecessary—but far more dangerous—if North Korea becomes a nuclear power.

Notes

1. See Ted Galen Carpenter, "Options for Dealing with North Korea," Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 73, January 9, 2003; and Doug Bandow, "Wrong War, Wrong Place, Wrong Time: Why Military Action Should Not Be Used to Resolve the North Korean Nuclear Crisis," Cato Institute Foreign Policy Briefing no. 76, May 12, 2003.

2. "US Draws Up Plan to Bomb North Korea's Nuclear Plant," Agence France-Presse, April 22, 2003.

3. Quoted in Joyce Howard Price, "Lugar Says N. Korea Nukes Beg War Option," *Washington Times*, April 21, 2003, p. A1.

4. Quoted in Timothy L. O'Brien, "Learn from Saddam's Example, U.S. Warns Pyongyang," *International Herald Tribune*, April 10, 2003, p. 7; and Philip Pullella, "U.S. Cites Iraq as Lesson for Others," *Washington Times*, April 10, 2003, p. A15.

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Review, April 24, 2003, p. 6; Jay Solomon, "North Korea Talks Signal a Victory for Washington's Tough Line," *Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2003, p. A10; "North Korea Blinks," *New York Times*, April 17, 2003, p. A24; "Those Dictator 'Dominoes,'" *Wall Street Journal*, April 15, 2003, p. A14; "Message Received," *Investor's Business Daily*, April 15, 2003, p. A15; Mike Allen, "Bush: Iraq War Drove N. Korea to Concede," *Washington Post*, April 14, 2003, p. A11; and Doug Struck, "North Korea Drops Its Demand for One-on-One Talks with U.S.," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2003, pp. A1, A23. Bush administration supporters were strangely silent about the concessions that Washington made to win the North's agreement, including the exclusion of Japan and South Korea from the negotiations and the abandonment of any preconditions to the talks. See Karen DeYoung and Doug Struck, "Beijing's Help Led to Talks," *Washington Post*, April 17, 2003, pp. A1, A13. And these triumphal conclusions looked quite premature after Pyongyang used the meeting to threaten to test a weapon or sell plutonium. See, for example, Glenn Kessler, "N. Korea Says It Has Nuclear Arms," *Washington Post*, April 25, 2003, pp. A1, A18.

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9. James A. Baker III, "U.S. Needs to Put a Stop to N. Korea's Blackmail," *Los Angeles Times*, January 12, 2003, p. M5.

10. See, for example, Victor D. Cha, "Isolation, Not Engagement," *New York Times*, December 29, 2002, p. WK-9.

11. Jay Solomon and Christopher Cooper, "North Korea Is Vulnerable As U.S. Vows Economic Pressure," *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2002, pp. A1, A4.

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13. See, for example, James Brooke, "U.S. Plan for Trade Penalties for North Korea Worries South Korean Investors," *New York Times*, December 30, 2002, p. A7.

14. See Howard W. French, "Reversals in U.S. South Korean Links, and Some Jagged Fault Lines," *New York Times*, February 11, 2003, p. A13;

- Jay Solomon, "Pyongyang Warns of 'Total War' If U.S. Attacks," *Wall Street Journal*, February 7, 2003, p. A9; and Doug Struck and Glenn Kessler, "Foes Giving in to N. Korea's Nuclear Aims," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2003, p. A1.
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Nadler, "North Korea's Nuclear Neighbors," *The Nation*, July 4, 1994, pp. 17-19; David E. Sanger, "Wary of North Korea, Seoul Debates Building Atomic Bomb," *New York Times*, March 19, 1993, p. A8; Sam Jameson, "Official Says Japan Will Need Nuclear Arms If N. Korea Threatens," *Los Angeles Times*, July 29, 1993, p. A4; Daniel Williams, "Japan Hedges on Nuclear Arms Treaty," *Washington Post*, July 9, 1993, p. A17; Clayton James, "Korea Prompts Japan to Review No-Nukes Policy," *Christian Science Monitor*, August 10, 1993, pp. 1, 14; Charles A. Radin, "In Japan, Quiet Talk of Nuclear Arms," *Boston Globe*, September 21, 1993, pp. 10, 15; and Martin Sieff, "Japan Mulls Atomic Weapons to Deter Nuclear Neighbors," *Washington Times*, November 10, 1995, p. A13.

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104. Garfinkle.

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