

NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

**WHY THE US MUST SHIFT ITS NORTH KOREA POLICY FROM  
DISARMAMENT TO DETERRENCE**

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## **WHY THE US MUST SHIFT ITS NORTH KOREA POLICY FROM DISARMAMENT TO DETERRENCE**

After 11 September 2001, America's top priority shifted from selective engagement to defending the peace against its enemies, particularly terrorists and tyrants. In its 2002 National Security Strategy (NSS), the Bush administration established a primary objective from which all other objectives seem to originate: Prevent Our Enemies from Threatening Us, Our Allies, and Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction.<sup>1</sup> The Bush administration viewed North Korea's suspected nuclear weapons program with increased scrutiny and began to question whether or not Pyongyang could be deterred from taking unwanted actions. North Korea's recently disclosed nuclear weapons program, rampant proliferation of long-range ballistic missiles, hatred of the United States, disrespect for human values, and global sales of missile technology to terrorist groups and other rogue states has made it a high-level threat to the national security of the United States and a subject of continuous of debate in Washington and among the media.

Because of the high risks of deterring rogue nations and non-state actors, the Bush Administration adopted a strategic objective of disarmament. The NSS implies that if diplomacy does not work in North Korea and Kim Jong Il does not disarm peacefully, he will be forcibly disarmed by the United States and a coalition of "the willing." But is North Korea really not deterrable or should the United States reevaluate its strategic objectives? Since North Korea sees the possession of both nuclear weapons and long-range missiles as key to its survival, it will not be deterred by the United States from developing more nuclear weapons or be compelled to

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<sup>1</sup> White House, The National Security Strategy of the United States, September 2002 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2002), 1.

disarm. Instead, the United States should shift its focus from forcible disarmament to deterring North Korea from using WMD to avoid becoming engulfed in a major war that it did not need to initiate.

### **The Case for Disarmament**

It is understandable why the Bush administration and many others have decided to take the forcible disarmament approach. First, some supporters of preemption argue that allowing North Korea to possess nuclear weapons will send a message that will undermine the continuing attempts to stem nonproliferation and lead Tokyo, Taiwan, and Seoul to seriously consider nuclearization and negate historical gains already won by the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Second, by admitting that it had a nuclear weapons development program, they argue that Pyongyang is showing positive signs that it is finally willing to negotiate honestly and openly. Third, disarmament supporters argue the preemption policy, combined with the war in Iraq, will create a sense of urgency among the regional powers, particularly China, to pressure North Korea toward denuclearization. Finally, they argue deterrence will not work against North Korea since threats have not convinced Kim Jong Il to stop reviving and expanding its nuclear weapons program.

With respect to undermining the NPT, the United States can alleviate the concerns of its allies in the region by declaring a strong and very clear weapons of mass destruction deterrence policy to Pyongyang that delineates that any use of or sale of these weapons will open the regime to a devastating U.S. response. By declaring such a deterrence policy and continuing to maintain a nuclear umbrella over Japan and South Korea, the chances of any of these countries beginning a nuclear weapons program becomes unlikely.

The next arguments are valid, but they ignore the historical track record of North Korea. Granted, Pyongyang has shown signs of opening up by disclosing its nuclear weapons program. And yes, since the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, both China and North Korea seem to be taking the U.S. policy of preemption more urgently. China halted oil shipments to North Korea for three days, Pyongyang dropped its demand for bilateral talks with the United States, and China has agreed to participate in talks.<sup>2</sup> China's inclusion is a tremendous first step to resolving this crisis. However, Kim Jong Il may be, once again, buying time for continuing his nuclear weapons development program and looking for aid in return for agreeing to something he already agreed to and violated many times before. Pyongyang has historically resorted to crisis diplomacy and brinkmanship, using its nuclear program as a bargaining chip when in an unfavorable, defensive position. The problem with the policy of preemption is America must be willing to use military force if North Korea, once again, fails to follow through and does not disarm. If America does not preempt as its policy implies, U.S. credibility may suffer and will only prove to Kim Jong Il that brinkmanship works.

Unlike Iraq, North Korea has not used WMD or shown the intent to do so. As Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld said, "North Korea by contrast, is a country teetering on the verge of collapse. Its history has been one of using its weapons to blackmail the West into helping stave off economic disaster. North Korea is a threat to be sure, but it is a different kind of threat."<sup>3</sup> U.S. deterrence credibility is very strong when it comes to deterring WMD use or attack.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Marquand, "Watching Iraq, China Begins to Lean on North Korea," Christian Science Monitor, 8 April 2003, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Donald H. Rumsfeld quoted in "North Korea Is a Threat, but Iraq is Unique," Air Force Magazine, March 2003, 16.

## The Problem With Disarmament

The ways and means for the United States to disarm Kim Jong Il are extremely limited. In fact, the military means to disarm North Korea have been taken off the table for several reasons.<sup>4</sup> With such a tremendous number of forces poised along the demilitarized zone (DMZ) it shares with South Korea, North Korea could launch an attack against Seoul in response to an American preemptive attack and, in a short period of time, impose unacceptable damage to Seoul. After taking note of the US's preemptive war against Iraq, North Korea is undoubtedly reinforcing its capability to do just that. With such high risks, South Korea does not support a preemptive strike.

In addition, there would be tremendous risks in attempting to strike the sources of proliferation concern. U.S. and Chinese intelligence sources believe Pyongyang may have already built one to five nuclear weapons. Even if the U.S. possesses what seems to be accurate intelligence on the locations (see Figure 1), they can be moved or buried deep underground, making targeting difficult and invulnerable to air strikes. Also, by exhausting diplomatic means to resolve the issue prior to attack, the preemptive attack may be appropriate, but the element of surprise becomes more difficult to achieve.

**Figure 1. North Korea's Nuclear Facilities<sup>5</sup>**



<sup>4</sup> David Frum, "There is No Making Deals with Dangerous Regimes," American Enterprise Institute for Public Research Policy, 19 October 2002, [http://www.aei.org/include/news\\_print.asp?newsID=14393](http://www.aei.org/include/news_print.asp?newsID=14393) (16 March 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Monterey Institute of International Studies, 2002, <http://cns.miis.edu/research/korea/index.htm> (16 April 2003).

In addition, the targeting of nuclear reactors carries a risk due to their unknown status.

Radioactive fallout from the bombing of these reactors could cover the population centers in North Korea, South Korea, Japan, China, and Taiwan.<sup>6</sup> So, even though the United States has the military means to disarm the DPRK such as a limited operation against Kim Jong Il's nuclear reactors, the costs to Seoul may prove unacceptable. This explains why an anonymous senior Bush administration official concluded that although the United States has military options, "we don't have good ones."<sup>7</sup>

Unfortunately, the diplomatic and economic means to accomplish this objective are not very feasible or have been exhausted. When considering economic ways to force disarmament, there are a couple of factors that greatly minimize the credibility of economically isolating North Korea. First, China is unlikely to participate in cutting off its economic assistance for fear that such an action combined with international sanctions would lead to an immediate collapse or escalation. North Korea has stated repeatedly as early as 1994 that it considers sanctions an act of war. Besides, economic sanctions are unlikely to alter the behavior of a country that is one of the most economic isolated countries in the world. Second, Beijing views North Korea as a strategic buffer zone providing distance from the democratic South and U.S. presence.<sup>8</sup> North Korea also acts a buffer between the South and China's Yanbian Autonomous Region of the Jilin Province where almost 40 percent of the population is Korean. Since normalization between China and South Korea, there has been a constant rise in visits between the two countries that may have supported

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<sup>6</sup> The Institute of National Strategic Studies, "The Proliferation Challenge of North Korea," May 1995 <http://www.fas.org/spp/starwars/program/docs/41thep.html> (20 October 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Phillip C. Saunders, "Military Options for Dealing with North Korea's Nuclear Program," Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 27 January 2003, <http://cns.miis.edu/research/korea/dprkmil.htm> (16 April 2003).

<sup>8</sup> Nicolas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings, "Assessing Interests and Objectives of Major Actors in the Korean Drama," in Nicholas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings, eds., Korea's Future and the Great Powers, Chapter 12, 332.

the province's rapid economic progress. Beijing is concerned that a North Korea collapse would not only be an economic burden, but if it leads to a unified Korea, may weaken ethnic Korean loyalties to China and build nationalist fervor.<sup>9</sup>

With Pyongyang's record of deception and dishonesty, diplomatic ways should not be too high on anyone's options list either. It has been in violation more than not of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) it signed in 1985.<sup>10</sup> It admitted its violations and withdrew from the NPT only after we confronted them with evidence that they were cheating. Shortly after signing it, North Korea violated its 1991 safeguard agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) that allowed the inspection of nuclear facilities at Yongbyon.<sup>11</sup> This led to the 1994 Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea after being on the brink of war.<sup>12</sup> And finally, North Korea's nuclear weapons program violates the Agreed Framework as well as the 1991 North-South agreement it signed with Seoul. These actions have proven that the only deals you can make with North Korea are bad ones.

### **Deterrence Will Work**

Although North Korea's nuclear advancement, biological weapons capability, and history of providing weapons to rogue states can be seen as more threatening than anything Saddam has today, the Bush administration chose to preempt Iraq mainly because it still has options to prevent

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<sup>9</sup> Michael McDevitt, "The Post-Korean Unification Security Landscape and U.S. Security Policy in Northeast Asia," in Nicholas Eberstadt and Richard J. Ellings, eds., Korea's Future and the Great Powers, Chapter 9, 260.

<sup>10</sup> Barbara Slavin, "North Korea Pulls Out of Non-Nuclear Treaty," USA Today, 10 April 2003, 10.

<sup>11</sup> C. S. Eliot Kang, "North Korea and the U.S. Grand Security Strategy," Comparative Strategy 20, no. 1 (2001): The North Korean Threat [The agreement was called the Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, and Exchanges and Cooperation Between the North and the South as stated in the book The Future of North Korea, edited by Tsuneo Akaha, Routledge, London, 2002].

<sup>12</sup> James A. Baker, III, "No More Caving on North Korea," Washington Post, 23 October 2002, sec. A.

Iraq from doing the same thing that North Korea presumably has already done – develop WMD and the delivery systems by which it can attack its neighbors and the United States. As enumerated in the prior section, the ways and means to attain a goal of disarmament are not available. North Korea will not be deterred from developing weapons it perceives as essential to remaining in power. Kim Jong Il places supreme importance on preventing the United States from interfering in North Korean actions on the peninsula or eliminating his regime. Consequently, a nuclear North Korea is the price we pay for continuing to make deals with a country that doesn't seem capable of sticking to its side of the bargain.

Now that a nuclear North Korea is reality, the Bush administration must establish a clear, declaratory nuclear deterrence policy for North Korea. Of course, the United States continues to have the capability to deter North Korea from attacking and, along with South Korea, has successfully deterred it from attacking south for more than 50 years. However, the clarity and credibility of the U.S.'s deterrence policy and the character, calculation, and cultural influences of Kim Jong Il in today's uncertain global security environment today will ultimately determine North Korea's susceptibility to deterrence.

If these factors were examined, the administration could better anticipate Kim Jong Il's likely response to U.S. deterrence threats and develop a deterrence policy tailored specifically to the unique conditions associated with North Korea. Deterrence expert and Georgetown University professor Keith Payne developed a framework that can be used as a basis for such an examination.<sup>13</sup> Before identifying deterrence options and developing policy, this framework can be used to take into consideration:

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<sup>13</sup> Keith B. Payne, The Fallacies of Cold War Deterrence and a New Direction (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2001), 111.

1. Objectives and actions to be deterred
2. Factors that affect decision-making
3. Adversary's susceptibility to U.S. policies (credibility  $\times$  intent) and vice versa
4. A strategic profile with respect to current situation

The primary U.S. objective is to prevent North Korea from resolving any crisis by force, deter it from proliferation, and preserve U.S. freedom of action in the region. This includes deterring an invasion of Seoul, a ballistic missile attack against U.S. and its allies, a nuclear strike against United States, Japan or South Korea, and the sale of WMD to a third party.

North Korea's immediate objective is regime survival with the secondary objective of preventing economic collapse. In the mind of the Kim Jong Il, ownership of nuclear weapons limits the freedom in which his enemies can engage him. North Korean leadership has a high level of determination and commitment to develop WMD because vulnerability could lead to U.S. attack and certain defeat. The possession of WMD also provides a great bargaining chip in negotiations for the aid upon which the country so desperately depends. Since North Korea was abandoned by its Communists patrons of the Cold War, chronic food shortages, bankrupt state enterprises, high unemployment, and weak economic conditions have caused widespread famine, moribund health care, industrial decline, and fuel oil and electricity shortages.<sup>14</sup> With approximately 25-30% of the GDP allocated to the military under these conditions, Kim Jong Il is willing to sacrifice the well being of his own people to protect the regime.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, due to

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<sup>14</sup> Multiple sources: The division of the nation after the war resulted in the majority of rice-producing land in the South. "Executive Summary, Korea, North," Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – China and Northeast Asia, 2002, <http://www4.janes.com/search97cgi> (23 September 2002), and Energy Information Association, "North Korea," September 2001, 1. <http://www.eia.doe.gov/emeu/cabs/nkorea.html> (12 October 2002).

<sup>15</sup> "North Korea – Asia – Overview," Periscope, 1 June 2001, <http://www.periscope.ucg.com/nations/asia/northkor/organz/index.html> (23 September 2002), Nations, Alliances/Geographic Regions.

its “self-reliance” philosophy, the North Korean regime has rejected political overtures of the most conciliatory president in the history of South Korea, Kim Dae Jung. These beliefs and actions may not appear reasonable, but they do demonstrate rationality and predictability.

Payne also considers a challenger’s perception of the United States critical to its reaction to deterrent threats. North Korea devotes considerable attention to U.S. and international community action and policy, but its distorted view of the United States has led to miscalculation of U.S. actions. For example, it thought the United States would provide aid in order to resolve the ‘crisis’ of its Fall 2002 nuclear disclosure. Instead, the Bush administration continued to demand disarmament. Certainly, this miscalculation is understandable considering the lack of a consequential U.S. and international response to North Korea’s violation of the Agreed Framework and withdrawal from the NPT.

The only declared U.S. nuclear policy for North Korea is the failed Agreed Framework. Although the preemptive provisions of the NSS imply that the United States should be threatening North Korea with the same fate as Iraq, the Bush administration has signaled that it will not use force. The key to establishing a credible deterrence policy is to determine the level of risks North Korea’s leadership is willing to take and the level of credibility of U.S. deterrence in the mind of these leaders.

North Korea has made several attempts to deter the United States from interfering with its nuclear weapons development on the peninsula. For example, it has warned that sanctions are an act of war and is currently threatening to convert fuel rods into plutonium for nuclear weapons.<sup>16</sup> Because the Korean peninsula may be viewed by Pyongyang as not a vital interest for the United States, Pyongyang believes the United States is unwilling to sustain large casualties and can be

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<sup>16</sup> Joel S. Wit, “North Korea: The Leader of the Pack,” *Washington Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2001): 77.

deterred from intervention. This belief has probably weakened somewhat since the U.S.-led war in Iraq.

It is this North Korean brinkmanship, including the recent decision to drop bilateral demands and return to the negotiating table, that demonstrates a strong awareness of consequences. While Pyongyang has violated numerous agreements and recurrently makes dangerous threats, it has a tendency to comply when necessary. With his country's deteriorating economy, Kim Jong Il realizes further provocation could lead to fatal and political losses for his regime. Therefore, he is probably keenly aware that a North Korean attack would be the end of his regime and cause massive costs to his country. This seems to make a very strong case for a deterrable North Korea.

### **A Rogue In A Class By Itself**

Based on the above examination, North Korea has rationale leaders that are calculating and are willing to take medium risks associated with developing nuclear weapons in order to survive. Then again, Pyongyang views the U.S. nuclear deterrence as very credible and is very aware of and understands the risks and costs of launching an attack against its neighbors or the United States. Despite NSS generalities that deterrence is less likely to work against rogue nations, North Korea's leadership can be deterred. Consequently, the United States should establish a nuclear deterrence policy for North Korea that will clearly communicate and that threatens nuclear retaliation in response to an invasion of Seoul, WMD attack against the United States or its allies, or sale to a third party. Do we want to forcibly disarm North Korea, quite possibly at the risk of losing many lives, if there is a high probability that deterrence will work? Given that South Korea and Japan are willing to accept the risks of a nuclear North Korea and entrust its security in the power of U.S. deterrence, definitely not.

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