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RETURN TO AN ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION

In many ways, the situation on the Korean peninsula is unchanged from fifty years ago when an armistice ended major combat operations of the Korean War. Large conventional forces face each other across the 38th parallel. Large North Korean artillery formations in range of Seoul can reduce portions of the city to rubble in a matter of hours.[1] Occasional land and sea incursions into South Korean territory occur, resulting in fighting between North and South Korean forces. The United States maintains a large military force on the peninsula and in Japan as a deterrent to another invasion of South Korea.

However, the strategic environment has changed significantly. The end of the Cold War brought significant economic growth to East Asia, leaving many nations tied to global trade to sustain their economies. Yet North Korea, essentially a failed state, is increasingly isolated, sustained only by outside assistance and its ability to allow her people to endure tremendous suffering. Despite that, it has invested heavily in military technology through the development, testing, and export of ballistic missiles and recent resumption of a nuclear-weapons development program.[2] As a result, Pyongyang poses not only a conventional threat to South Korea; it poses a regional and global nuclear threat.[3]

This paper will examine the strategic environment on the Korean peninsula, U.S. national interests and objectives, current U.S. policies, and recommend a strategy to resolve the current situation.

STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT
INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

North Korea – The end of the Cold War tore large holes in Pyongyang's safety net. The loss of the Soviet Union and other East European communist nations as trading partners and sources of aid weakened an already fragile economy. China emerged from the Cold War a

growing economic power, tied to global trade and with little interest in supporting North Korean adventures that might damage Asian Chinese, or global economic stability.[4]

Pyongyang's number one goal is regime survival.[5] To achieve this it craves security guarantees, diplomatic recognition by the U.S. and more economic aid.[6] However, with little power other than the threat of invading South Korea, North Korea has pursued two military technologies, nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

North Korean nuclear programs historically have been used to extract concessions.[7] Work began on a nuclear program in the 1980s. In 1985, Pyongyang agreed to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and end its nuclear program in exchange for the Soviet Union building four light-water reactor power plants. However, these reactors were never built. In 1991, North and South Korea entered into a denuclearization accord that forbade both sides to test, manufacture, produce, receive, possess, store, deploy, or use nuclear weapons and further forbade the possession of nuclear reprocessing and uranium enrichment facilities. North Korea's failure to abide by the terms of this agreement resulted in talks with the U.S. that led to the 1994 Agreed Framework. For agreeing to freeze its nuclear program, Pyongyang received some concessions, including the commitment to fund and construct light-water reactor power plants. Though work began on this project, it has never been completed. In the last few years, evidence collected by the U.S. and its allies point toward existence of a clandestine uranium-enrichment program in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework.[8] In October 2002, during talks with the U.S., North Korea admitted to having such a program and stated that it had the right to do so. Since then, Pyongyang has withdrawn from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and declared its intentions to use its nuclear program to produce nuclear weapons.[9]

North Korea, in parallel with its nuclear program, developed a ballistic missile capability. The program evolved from a short/medium range to a long-range capability that can strike

anywhere in the region. Pyongyang revealed this capability in dramatic fashion on August 31, 1998, when it launched a missile over Japan in an unannounced test. Also troubling for the U.S., North Korea exported this technology to other nations including Iran, another state whose nuclear ambitions are also cause for concern.[10]

It is difficult to say if North Korea pursued nuclear and ballistic missile programs solely as bargaining chips for extracting concessions. However, that pattern has emerged over the last twenty years[11] and once again brings the U.S. and Pyongyang's neighbors to the negotiating table.

South Korea – The South Korean view of North Korea has begun to evolve in the last decade. The "sunshine policy" of former President Kim Dae Jung, aimed at improving relations with North Korea and embraced by his successor Roh Moo Hyun, was an important issue during the 2002 election campaign.[12] South Koreans feel that an engagement policy toward the North offers the greatest opportunity for reunification of the peninsula.[13]

Influencing this shift are the changing demographics of the South Korean population. The younger generations, who do not remember the Korean War, are becoming the dominant demographic group and are as likely to see the U.S. as a threat to their security as they do Pyongyang.[14] However, while the people of South Korea want national reconciliation with North Korea, there is concern about the impact on their society and economy when it takes place. Some are reluctant to become a party to multilateral negotiations and prefer that resolution of security issues occur during bilateral talks between the U.S. and North Korea. This reluctance may be perceived as a weakness by North Korea and exploited during negotiations.[15]

China – China is North Korea's largest supplier of aid and major trading partner. Beijing has been disinclined to enter into multilateral negotiations to resolve the latest crisis, preferring

to act as a host for bilateral talks between the United States and North Korea. However, China fears both the collapse of North Korea and its becoming a nuclear power.[16]

North Korean failure to resolve its security disputes could result in severe economic sanctions by either the aforementioned multinational partners or the United Nations. If North Korea's economy collapses, China would face a massive refugee problem, escalating the financial and security burden they have supporting an estimated 100,000 to 200,000 North Koreans already inside their border.[17]

If North Korea refuses to give up its nuclear weapons program and survives sanctions, those nations most vulnerable to attack by Pyongyang may decide to develop their own nuclear weapons. The prospect of a nuclear South Korea, Japan, or Taiwan frightens China and could destabilize the entire region.[18]

Japan – Japan had been pursuing an engagement policy with North Korea. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi visited Pyongyang in September 2002 and apologized for Japanese conduct during World War Two.[19] However, North Korea's withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty and development of nuclear weapons changes the calculus of the situation. Tokyo's priority will be to ensure that North Korea does not remain a nuclear power. The security and economic implications of an unpredictable, natural enemy with nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them would be severe. Additionally, Japan is still trying to come to grips with a very emotional issue, the recent admission by Kim Jong Il that North Korea abducted Japanese citizens in the 1970s and 1980s to help train spies.[20]

Russia – Russia, no longer a patron and supporter of North Korea, is now a trading partner of South Korea. It sees the economic improvement of North Korea as an opportunity to increase its stake in the region, especially if direct transportation links can be opened to South

Korea. Russia also realizes that a nuclear arms race in the region threatens its security. Moscow, like Beijing, has offered to facilitate bilateral or multilateral talks.[21]

DOMESTIC ENVIRONMENT

United States policies toward North Korea – During the Clinton administration, the U.S. pursued a conditional engagement policy toward North Korea in order to eliminate its nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Examples of this policy were: 1) negotiations that led to the 1994 Agreed Framework; 2) the appointment of former Secretary of Defense William Perry to review U.S. policy toward North Korea following the August 1998 ballistic missile launch; and 3) high-level visits by Secretary of State Madeline Albright to Pyongyang and North Korean Vice Marshal Jo Myong Rok to Washington in October 2000.[22]

When the Bush administration took office in 2001, their policy toward North Korea was undefined. Early that spring, when Secretary of State Colin Powell indicated that the administration would continue the engagement policy of the Clinton administration, President Bush contradicted him, saying the policy was under review.[23] Before the new administration decided on a policy, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11th, changing the tone and focus of the Bush government.

The first definitive policy statement came in the January 2002 State of the Union address when President Bush declared North Korea part of the "axis of evil."[24] The administration's tone grew increasingly hostile throughout 2002, announcing in March that use of nuclear weapons against North Korea was possible. In September, the new national security strategy stated that preemption could be used against threats to U.S. security.[25]

Following the discovery by U.S. intelligence and the open admission by North Korea that the nuclear program had been restarted, the Bush administration declared that no negotiations would be held until Pyongyang dismantled its nuclear program. North Korea has refused to

cease its program and demands a formal non-aggression treaty before it will sit down to discuss the situation. President Bush, who faces this dilemma while he still confronts the global war on terrorism and operations in Iraq, wants to engage Pyongyang in multilateral talks to resolve the crisis.

U.S. NATIONAL INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES

The situation on the Korean peninsula challenges two vital U.S. national interests: security and economic prosperity. Allowing North Korea to maintain its nuclear weapons program, coupled with a ballistic missile program, poses the following national security threats:

1) U.S. soil vulnerable to nuclear strike
2) Regional allies vulnerable to nuclear strike
3) U.S. military forces stationed in South Korea and Japan vulnerable to nuclear strike
4) Fear of North Korea could lead other nations (South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan) to develop their own nuclear weapons capability, possibly destabilizing the entire region
5) North Korea's export of its ballistic missile program to Iran, Pakistan, and Syria to obtain hard currency proliferates dangerous technology to other parts of the world
6) Serves as an example to other rogue states that they can develop nuclear weapons, keep them despite international pressure, and use them as instrument of power

The second vital U.S. national interest challenged by North Korea is economic prosperity. Without peaceful resolution of the crisis in a reasonable period, U.S. trade with Asia could be impacted.[26] This would affect U.S. and Asian economies, resulting in a recession in the Pacific Rim and possibly many major economies of the world.

To protect these vital interests, U.S. objectives for the region should be:

1) Eliminate the North Korean nuclear program
2) Remove all weapons-grade nuclear material from North Korea
3) Halt the North Korean ballistic missile development program and eliminate these weapons from its inventory
4) Stop the export of ballistic missile technology to other nations
5) Start a meaningful reunification process between North and South Korea that leads to a stable peninsula

OPPORTUNITIES AND CONTRAINTS

The principal opportunity this crisis presents the Bush administration is the use of a multilateral approach to resolve this issue. The so-called unilateral approach used in Iraq

damaged U.S. relations with many nations around the world and at the United Nations. Domestically, questions remain about the validity of the evidence used to justify the invasion, fueled further by international skepticism that denied the U.S. additional allies and UN approval.

Within Asia, a multilateral approach gives all nations a chance to put their varied concerns on the table. Involving nations from the European Union/NATO, especially France and Germany, and the UN helps mend relationships damaged during Operation Iraqi Freedom. In addition, the negotiating process with North Korea will probably take a number of years, so building a multinational partnership and reaching agreement of the road ahead will be critical to success.

However, these same opportunities also present constraints for the Bush administration. The U.S. will have to demonstrate that it is sincere about a multilateral approach and that it takes seriously the concerns of other nations. This will further complicate negotiations because national interests and objectives of all nations will not coincide. Domestically, Congress and the American people will question why the administration thinks it can reach a deal with North Korea, a nation that has broken every agreement it has ever signed on these issues.[27]

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS
INSTRUMENTS OF POWER

In order to take advantage of the opportunities presented by the current North Korean crisis, the first two elements of power and influence the U.S. should consider are diplomacy and information. To be successful in a multilateral approach with North Korea, the United States must employ patient diplomacy and be seen as truly desiring a peaceful resolution to the current situation. Establishing and maintaining a multilateral partnership of East Asian nations as they work through various strategies to persuade North Korea to change its current course will be a challenge. In order to be prepared in case multilateral talks fail, dialogue with EU/NATO and the UN should begin in parallel. The power of information will be critical to the negotiation

process, not necessarily directed at North Korea but at U.S. partners in the process. North Korea is a closed society and any public diplomacy campaign has little hope of influencing that nation. However, Washington needs to convey clear messages that it is serious about the process, listens to the concerns of multilateral partners, and is willing to compromise when necessary.

Another important instrument of influence will be economic power. North Korea has a centrally controlled economy that has been in a state of collapse for over a decade and is dependent on foreign aid.[28] Even so, her leadership has demonstrated a willingness to inflict great suffering on the people, allowing millions to starve in the last decade.[29] During negotiations with North Korea, the U.S. must consider carefully the use of economic sanctions and aid. Pyongyang desperately needs additional aid to bolster her failed economy. However, this economic aid must be tied to clear, verifiable actions by North Korea. Similarly, any decisions on additional economic sanctions must contemplate North Korean reaction. With a demonstrated ability to suffer great hardship, will North Korea respond to additional sanctions or lash out? A final element of economic power that needs to be part of the dialogue is investment. Many nations, most notably China, are already trying to help North Korea improve economically by encouraging the establishment of free market economic zones and foreign investment. While these efforts have yet to achieve success, they may indicate the path for the long-term transformation of North Korea's economy and must be part of the negotiating process.[30]

The final instrument is military power. The U.S. maintains a significant military force in the Pacific, largely for the defense of South Korea. While these forces would certainly respond to any North Korean invasion of the South, the more likely use of military power would be to strike nuclear and ballistic missile facilities in an attempt to destroy or at least cripple these programs. Like economic sanctions, military strike options must be thoroughly examined with all possible North Korean responses carefully considered. Even if military strikes successfully

destroyed all nuclear and missile facilities, Pyongyang could respond by invading South Korea and starting a conventional war on the peninsula.

STRATEGIES

The U.S. and its allies have a long history of using conditional engagement with North Korea with little success. Especially with regard to its nuclear program, Pyongyang, after extracting some concessions or aid from other countries, has broken or renounced every agreement and treaty it has signed since 1985.[31] Most agreements were successful for a period, but were discarded when North Korea felt threatened, needed leverage for more concessions, or felt other nations had not kept their part of the agreement (e.g. light-water reactor power plants). However, North Korea's willingness to engage in talks and reach agreements does suggest that conditional engagement is still a viable strategy. Using a multilateral partnership, particularly one that includes China, and ensuring that any agreement provides for intrusive inspections to verify compliance will be critical for success and gaining both international and domestic support.

Some strategies offer little chance for success in the North Korean scenario. Containment and denial will have little effect on Pyongyang's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. The nuclear program appears to have reached a level of domestic self-sufficiency and the main external partners in the ballistic missile program -- Iran, Pakistan, and Syria -- are not likely to cooperate with any attempt to curtail the missile development and export program. Deterrence, to be effective, requires a rational opponent. North Korea has proven repeatedly that it cannot be counted on to act in a rational manner. Compellence or intervention requires action in order to force North Korea to comply with the desires of the multilateral partnership, a strategy that could cause it to lash out with conventional forces and invade South Korea.

The final strategy to consider is preemption, a clearly stated element of President Bush's National Security Strategy. While successful use of preemption to preclude an imminent nuclear attack would be justifiable under international law, it would probably provoke a conventional attack on South Korea. However, it should be preserved as an option of last resort if North Korea does not give up its nuclear and missile programs and decides to attack one or more of its neighbors.

RECOMMENDATION

North Korea's focus is regime survival. From a security viewpoint, it feels threatened by the U.S. and to a lesser extent South Korea. Economically it requires foreign assistance to meet many of its basic food and energy needs. It lacks the classic elements of power, although it has considerable conventional military capability. It has developed a nuclear capability and ballistic missile program, using these to get attention and extract concessions from its friends and adversaries. It has a proven record of breaking every agreement and treaty it has signed when it serves its current agenda.

Given this background, the recommended U.S. strategy for dealing with North Korea is:

1) Establish a multilateral partnership with China, Russia, Japan, and South Korea to negotiate with North Korea – While this will complicate the process of coming to consensus on a negotiating strategy, it is critical that all nations have a stake in the negotiations and understand each has much to lose should they fail.

2) Insist negotiations deal with Pyongyang's nuclear program, ballistic missile program, conventional forces, and economic program – The goal of these negotiations should be the reduction of the threat of war on the Korean peninsula and the long-term economic recovery of North Korea. Without a reduction in GDP expenditure on defense programs, North Korea will forever be an economic basket case.

3) Involve EU/NATO nations from the beginning, giving them insight into the status and progress of the negotiations – It is important to involve our European allies for three reasons: 1) the Bush administration needs to begin working issues on a multilateral basis as a counter to the perceived U.S. unilateral approach in Iraq; 2) the negotiating positions with North Korea must be consistent with those used to deal with the Iranian nuclear program; and 3) if this issue comes to the UN the administration wants to ensure EU/NATO support.

4) Bring the North Korean issue to the UN Security Council if multilateral talks fail – The groundwork for that possibility should be done in parallel to the multilateral talks.

5) Negotiate an agreement that proceeds in steps, each that provides for the transparency required to verify compliance and leave no ability for North Korea to reverse any progress already achieved – Learn from the mistakes of past agreements with North Korea. Do not allow fissile material to remain in North Korea, even monitored by an international body.

6) Keep all agreements with North Korea – If the agreement calls (again) for light-water reactor power plants to be built, proceed with construction as soon as possible.

7) Be prepared to use additional economic sanctions, but only as one of the last resorts – Economic sanctions, as in Iraq, will probably only hurt the people of North Korea, not the leadership. International and domestic support may be low for sanctions for this reason.

8) Do not take the military option off the table, but make sure our partners know it is a last resort – If the U.S. uses preemptive military force, the case must be airtight. U.S. legitimacy to use preemptive military action suffers both domestically and internationally because of our actions in Iraq.

9) The U.S. must be prepared to give North Korea what it wants, a security guarantee and diplomatic recognition – These must only come at the end of a long and verifiable road.

NOTES

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