

North Korea and Nuclear Weapons - Policy Options

Recommended Citation

"North Korea and Nuclear Weapons - Policy Options", Briefing Books DPRK, July 21, 2003, <https://nautilus.org/briefing-books/dprk/north-korea-and-nuclear-weapons-policy-options/>

[Choices for the 21st Century Education Program](#)

Brown University's Watson Institute for International Studies, 2003

What follows is a framework of policy "Options" that address the current debate about North Korea. These options are designed to help you think about a range of possible policies and the ramifications of each. The four options provided are not intended as a menu of choices. Rather, they are framed in stark terms to highlight very different policy approaches. Each option includes a set of criticisms against it. These are designed to help you think carefully about the risks and trade-offs of each. After you have had a chance to consider each of the options presented, we encourage you to articulate your own considered judgment on this issue. You may want to borrow heavily from one of the options presented, combine ideas from several, or take a new approach altogether. As you frame your "Option 5," think about the following questions:

- What U.S. interests are at stake in this issue?
- What is the history of U.S. relations with North Korea?
- What is motivating North Korea to take this path?
- How pressing is the issue of North Korea compared to other security priorities?
- How does the war on terrorism fit into discussion about this issue?
- How does our relationship with China, South Korea, and Japan fit into this issue?
- What steps should the United States take in the coming weeks and months?
- What should our long-term goals be?
- What values are important to you?
- What are the pros and cons of this option?

Option 1: Launch a Preemptive Military Strike

The security of the United States is in jeopardy as long as this regime in North Korea is in power. In order to eliminate the nuclear threat posed by North Korea, we must act quickly and decisively. A speedy, surgical attack on nuclear weapons development sites will destroy North Korea's ability to make nuclear bombs, initiate the downfall of Kim Jong-Il's regime, and send a clear message that the United States will not accept nuclear proliferation. Waiting much longer before taking action will ensure that North Korea will have at least one nuclear bomb that it could use against its neighbors, if not against the United States. Weapons-grade fissile material is also easy to transport. Once North Korea has what it feels is enough to gain leverage, it could begin to sell its nuclear power to whomever it wants. If we choose to negotiate with the North Koreans, it will give them time and we will never know how much weapons-grade nuclear material was squirreled away in the interim. Therefore, we will never be able to remove North Korea from the list of countries possessing nuclear weapons. This uncertainty could compel Japan or Taiwan to develop their own nuclear weapons program as a deterrent. Nuclear proliferation in Asia could, in turn, set off an arms race that could go world-wide. We must act now to prevent this possibility. Our only option for peace and security in the future is to take military action now.

Goals

- Eliminate North Korea's threat of nuclear war by destroying the reactors and processors that are producing weapons-grade plutonium and uranium.
- Communicate to other states that nuclear proliferation is unacceptable. U.S. Policies
- Use the U.S. military to destroy North Korea's nuclear weapons production facilities.
- Prepare to respond to any North Korean attacks.

Underlying Beliefs

- Military might is the only language Kim Jong Il understands. We should not negotiate with irrational, evil people.
- The molasses-like speed with which the international community can deal with problems such as these will not meet the requirements of the timetable in this case.
- The containment policy in use since 1994 has failed.

Criticisms

- A pre-emptive unilateral attack on North Korea would violate international law.
- To bypass negotiation in favor of plans for military action will only increase North Korea's determination to build a nuclear capability as quickly as possible as a deterrence.
- It is very possible that the North Korean nuclear weapons development facilities are not all above ground. We are sure to miss some of them in a conventional airstrike.
- In response to a military strike North Korea could launch strikes of its own against Japan, China, or South Korea, or our bases in those countries. Such a war could mean the deaths of millions.
- A war could also mean economic disaster resulting from the possible destruction of the Tokyo, Beijing, and Seoul stock markets.
- The radiation released from attacks against nuclear weapons facilities could kill thousands and be deadly for years to come.
- In order to prevent North Korean retaliation, the United States may be forced to threaten the use

of nuclear weapons. Invoking such a threat would put the United States in the position of threatening to kill hundreds of thousands of people.

- Our allies in the region are opposed to military action against North Korea.
- If this pre-emptive military option leads to war, or even widespread destruction, the United States would be blamed. This would heighten resentment of the United States throughout the rest of the world.
- Our presence in the Koreas is already unwanted by many in South Korea. Engaging in a war with their neighbor would destroy an already fragile relationship between the United States and South Korea.

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Option 2: Contain and Deter North Korea

North Korea's long-range missiles and their arsenal of weapons of mass destruction are of the utmost concern, but we have no reason to give in to their attempts to blackmail us. We have successfully contained the threat from North Korea for the past fifty years, and we can continue to do so now. North Korea's recent announcement about its nuclear weapons program is part of an attempt to gain international leverage with the United States. North Korea has attempted to provoke us in the past, just as they are doing today by restarting their nuclear weapons program. The people of North Korea are starving; providing aid in return for false promises from the North Koreans only prolongs the existence of a regime that will create another crisis in the future when it needs more assistance. If we make deals now, the North Koreans will only be back later asking for more. Tyrants like Kim Jong Il understand force and power and he will take advantage of what he perceives to be weakness. We cannot afford to appear weak. We have a successful model for dealing with a hostile nuclear power - the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The Soviet Union was deterred successfully from using its tens of thousands of nuclear warheads by the threat of massive retaliation from the United States. Today, North Korea has one or two weapons and the ability to begin producing one or two a month, far fewer than the Soviet Union. If our goal is security for the region and the world, the wisest course of action is continued containment of the North Korean danger coupled with the threat of massive retaliation.

Goals

- Contain the threat from North Korea and deter its use of weapons of mass destruction.
- Contain the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
- Protect U.S. interests in the region.

U.S. Policies

- Provide strong U.S. support for International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections.
- Make it very clear that we will counter with comparable force - alone or with others - any aggressive actions on the part of North Korea.
- Reinvigorate negotiations between North Korea and other states in the region to provide other avenues for revenue and support for North Korea.
- Do not reward North Korea's threatening behavior with aid.

Underlying Beliefs

- Kim Jong Il is a dangerous dictator but he is not insane. He will not use weapons of mass destruction if he faces the risk of complete annihilation.
- The United States plays an essential role in containing and deterring threats to regional security. Peace and security on the Korean peninsula are critical to maintaining stability throughout Asia.
- Tyrannical dictators understand the equations of power and force. Negotiations and deals that reward bad behavior will only produce more problems for the United States in the long run.

Criticisms

- Containment by itself is not enough; if we do not take additional action with North Korea, we or our allies will eventually become targets of North Korea's weapons of mass destruction.
- Nothing short of a military attack can guarantee U.S. security. Unless we destroy their weapons facilities, they will continue to build nuclear weapons.
- Containment of North Korea will not address the underlying problem which is North Korea's fears that its national security is at risk.
- The policy of deterrence (and its potential consequences) is morally repugnant when there are alternatives like diplomacy and negotiation.
- Containment would not facilitate the dialogue between North Korea and South Korea that is desired by most Koreans and other Asians as the best long term guarantor of peace and security on the peninsula.
- Deterrence depends on rationality. Counting on Kim Jong Il to act rationally could be a huge miscalculation with horrific consequences.
- Deterrence may not work. North Korea's weapons could find their way into the hands of terrorists or other states willing to use them.
- Containing North Korea will not do anything for the people of North Korea. Millions are starving and oppressed. It is time for a regime change in North Korea.
- How can we guarantee that other states in the region will join the United States in a substantive way in a campaign to contain North Korea? Why should we bear the bulk of the burden?
- We are unwelcome in South Korea and Asia. Why should we risk American lives or spend our defense dollars for nations whose politicians gain popularity by exploiting public resentment of the United States, but rely on us to protect their countries?

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Option 3: Engage North Korea in Negotiations

We must confront the issue of North Korea's weapons with diplomacy. The countries in the region are asking the U.S. to talk directly with the North Koreans. The United States should remain flexible in its negotiation tactics, offering to work with others in the region. The UN Security Council or other international organizations or figures could help mediate discussions. However, it is essential to impress upon the countries surrounding North Korea that North Korea's possession of nuclear weapons threatens the countries of the region and their own national interests. We must encourage South Korea, in particular, to see the North as a threat, not simply a wayward relative. If the United States enters into negotiations with the North Koreans, the support the U.S. would receive from its

allies in the region would significantly diminish tensions between the United States and its Asian allies. The United States should begin negotiations with North Korea immediately. We should be willing to conduct talks anywhere that North Korea is willing to meet us. We should be willing to engage in diplomatic give-and-take to ensure that North Korea ends its nuclear program. Promoting talks is the best and safest way to halt the growing crisis with North Korea and promote peace and security for the region.

Goals

- End the development of nuclear weapons and long-range missiles in North Korea.
- Engage North Korea in the community of nations in order to remove its motivation to build weapons of mass destruction.
- Promote regional peace and strengthen diplomatic relationships with regional powers.

U.S. Policies

- Impress upon regional powers the severity of the crisis.
- Begin negotiations with North Korea. Offer significant, diplomatic carrots and sticks so that North Koreans recognize the benefits of halting their nuclear weapons program.

Underlying Beliefs

- North Korea does not want to engage in a suicidal war. It simply wants to get the world's attention, be given the aid it was promised by the United States in 1994, and feel secure.
- Negotiation is less expensive than war.
- Negotiation is the logical first step to resolving international problems.

Criticisms

- Initiating talks will be submitting to nuclear blackmail and will weaken the United States in the eyes of the world.
- If we negotiate, small countries will learn that they can get what they want from the United States by using "provocations."
- History has shown that negotiating with North Korea does not work.
- The time it takes to bring all the actors to the table - or even some of them - is too long. In the interim, North Korea may launch nuclear weapons against the United States or others in the region.
- While we negotiate, North Korea could sell its weaponry to terrorists.
- A policy of engagement will suggest to other rogue leaders that the possession of nuclear weapons will not result in strong action from the United States. Such an outcome would surely lead to further security threats to the United States.
- Our presence in the Koreas is unwelcome. Meddling in the affairs of the region will only subject us to further danger.
- Negotiating with North Korea, while simultaneously refusing to do so with Iraq, may be seen as a double standard.

Option 4: Withdraw from Korea

The smartest thing that the United States can do at this point is get off of the Korean Peninsula. Our 37,000 troops - costing us 100 [more like \$5 billion/year for USFK alone, \$25 billion for other forces in Western Pacific dedicated to supporting war in Korea] million dollars a year - are neither wanted there nor necessary to protect our Asian allies or ourselves. South Korea, with its own army of 600,000, has been hosting many anti-American rallies, as have other Asian countries. Our presence on the peninsula is no longer necessary as a military deterrent and we are clearly not welcome. It seems that all our presence on the Korean peninsula only serves to increase anti-American sentiment. Why should we risk American time, money, lives or reputation to protect countries that do not like us or want us there, yet cower and hide behind our might during tense moments, all the while criticizing our decisions

- Pulling our troops off of the peninsula will force other Asian countries to accept that they need to stand up to North Korea. North Korea's weapons program is a breach of world security and international treaties. The United States should not be the only country to take a stance against them. The whole world should take collective action. Until others accept some responsibility, we should remove ourselves from the peninsula, lower our profile, and use our time, money, and efforts elsewhere.**Goals**
 - Eliminate what appears to be a growing pattern of manipulation and threat by the North Korean government.
 - Lower our profile on the peninsula and in Asia in general.
- **U.S. Policies**
 - Remove American troops from the peninsula.
 - Encourage China, Japan, and Russia to play a more significant role in Asian security.
- **Underlying Beliefs**
 - North Korea does not want to go to war with the United States. It just wants publicity and attention.
 - Our limited military presence in South Korea does not add to either our or South Korea's security. If a real threat emerges, we have bases in Japan, Guam, and Hawaii to protect our interests in Asia.
 - Attacking North Korea, or levying stricter sanctions, will only lead to increased resentment toward our country by greatly exacerbating the humanitarian crisis there.
- **Criticisms**
 - By withdrawing, the United States would allow North Korea to develop nuclear weapons - a reality that endangers the world and weakens our image in the war on terror.
 - By withdrawing from the peninsula, the United States might be seen as walking away from a clear and present danger. Some may see this is a contradictory move as we prepare for a war against Iraq.
 - As the world's lone superpower, it is our responsibility to help ensure the safety of smaller countries. South Korea will be rendered nearly defenseless if the United States withdraws.
 - If the United States withdraws, any hope of successful North Korean/South Korean dialogue would be undermined, reducing the potential for reconciliation between the two Koreas.

- By ending all aid to North Korea and refusing to discuss a new aid package, the already horrific humanitarian situation in North Korea could be greatly exacerbated, leading to increased starvation and poverty as well as more anti-American sentiment.
 - Leaving North Korea's neighbors to fend for themselves may cause them to adopt their own nuclear weapons programs due to feelings of vulnerability.
 - The United States must remain engaged around the world if it hopes to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and terror.
 - Withdrawing from the peninsula could be perceived by other countries as a sign of U.S. weakness. The message will be: If you just make enough of the right kind of noise the United States will pick up and leave.
 - North Korea, with its desperate economic condition, might sell some of its products to anyone who will pay a pretty penny, including terrorists.
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