

Policy Forum 02-25A: Is the Axis of Evil Synchronizing its Asymmetric Offensive?



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by David S. Maxwell

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I. Introduction

This essay by David S. Maxwell asserts that North Korea's announcement of their nuclear development program may be a synchronized action among members of the U.S.-designated "axis of evil." The announcement potentially relieves pressure on Iraq, attacks US credibility, and further erodes the focus of US anti-terrorism efforts. While not advocating direct military confrontation, Maxwell argues that a visible commitment to South Korea is necessary and could be demonstrated by the re-start of such exercises as Team Spirit. David S. Maxwell is a U.S. Army officer with service in various command and staff assignments in Korea, Japan, the Philippines, and Europe for 22 years.

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Army or the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by David S. Maxwell

Is the Axis of Evil Synchronizing its Asymmetric Offensive?

by David S. Maxwell, United States Army

The "revelation" that North Korea is engaged in a nuclear weapons development program seems to be well-timed. The fundamental question is why did the North Korean leadership admit to this now? When faced with "evidence" in the past the Kim Family Regime never felt bad about denying it.

Of course there are those who want to believe North Korea is changing; that it is capable of reform. The recent admission is certainly viewed by some as North Korea "coming clean" and working toward becoming a respectable member of the community of nations. This is certainly in line with those who believe that "peace is breaking out all over" and who use as evidence the attempt to re-open relations with Japan, the restart of family reunions, the admission it kidnapped foreigners to help train its spies, the rail linkage project between north and South and the clearing of mines from part of the DMZ. I do not believe that for a minute.

Here is the North Korean strategy in a nutshell: The single (and extremely consistent) North Korean vital national interest remains survival of the Kim Family Regime (KFR). The single strategic aim necessary to protect that vital interest is reunification of the peninsula under Kim Family Regime control. The key condition to achieving this strategic aim is the removal of US troops from the Korean peninsula, thus providing the necessary correlation of forces (in North Korea's analysis) for it to successfully execute its campaign plan to reunify the peninsula under its control. If we fail to keep this strategy in mind as we deal with North Korea then we will never be able to begin to understand what is happening in North Korea.

So what is North Korea up to? Is this a deliberate attempt by North Korea to challenge the US on its new doctrine of pre-emptive strikes against emerging threats and thus discredit the US if it does not respond and ultimately forcing the US to execute a "double standard" foreign policy? Is this a coordinated effort to relieve the pressure on Iraq? Or is this an attempt to "look respectable" by coming clean as mentioned above?

Whether synchronized or not there are three major benefits (among many possible others for opponents of the US) to be derived from North Korea's actions. First, it could lead to greater opposition to potential western action against Iraq by discrediting US foreign policy and calling into question its new national security doctrine. Second, it could assist in its quest for the removal of US troops from the Korean peninsula. There are two ways this could help. One is due to the admission of the program, thereby causing people to believe that North Korea has changed and wants peace (and

therefore no US troops are needed on the peninsula). The other is the blackmail effect of having nuclear weapons. If the US is not willing to follow its new doctrine should its troops be left in harm's way of a known nuclear threat it is unwilling to eliminate? Third (and if you are a real conspiracy theorist), this could be a coordinated effort to weaken US efforts in the Global War on Terrorism. Regardless of whether the north's actions are synchronized with Iraq and/or Al Qaeda, these benefits can accrue all the same.

North Koreans are masters of asymmetric warfare. I believe that the nuclear weapons program is another example of this. North Korea is not going to fight until it has set the conditions it believes it must have to win; however, every single diplomatic, economic, political, and military move it makes is designed to further the goal of establishing the proper conditions - the main one being the removal of US troops from the peninsula and the subsequent belief that the US will adopt its past 1950 security strategy leaving Korea outside its sphere of protection.

On another note, do we really think increased international pressure will sway North Korea to give up its nuclear program? If North Korea bowed to international pressure now why did it not for the past 50 years when it has been nearly universally condemned for its actions in 1950 and all the subsequent terrorist acts it executed from DMZ infiltrations, the attempted assassinations of ROK leaders (and the killing of President Park Chung Hee's wife), the 1976 Panmunjom Ax murders, the downing of a Korean Airlines flight in the 1980s, the Northwest Islands/Northern Limit Line conflicts and the Sango, Yugo, and ISILC infiltrations (just to name a few "incidents.") No, I do not think North Korea will ever succumb to international diplomatic pressure on anything.

The other question we have to ask ourselves is why North Korea has a nuclear weapons development program at all. It is purely a matter of survival by its calculus. The US has nuclear weapons and North Korea believes it would not hesitate to use them against an Asian nation (it has done so in the past why not again?) By having nuclear weapons North Korea believes that it can deter the US from using them and in addition, possession of nuclear weapons will have a significant coercive effect on both the ROK and Japan. North Korea has been pursuing nuclear weapons since as early as 1962 and it is very unlikely that it has ever stopped this pursuit nor should we expect them to stop it as it is perceived by the regime to be a key element to ensure its survival.

The ultimate question is what should the US do. As has been argued in the past deterrence is the key. Those who really understand our "new" National Security Strategy understand that we have not discarded deterrence and that while we strive for prevention we will not always invoke pre-emption. However, to make deterrence work we cannot be afraid to demonstrate our strength and our will as has been the case in past. Some would argue that it was the "carrot" that caused the North Korean regime to accept the Agreed Framework in 1994; e.g., the promise of heavy fuel oil and an efficient nuclear reactor. However, it is often overlooked that the US did in fact reinforce the Republic of Korea with some significant combat power, including fighter aircraft and the Patriot Missile system in the spring of 1994.

North Korea is not afraid to go to the brink and it will continue to provoke and coerce as long as it continues to get what it desires. I would argue that it is not the carrot that causes North Korea to reach an agreement, it is the threat of the stick. Ultimately though it must be remembered that it is in North Korea's interest to continue its coercive diplomacy as it understands that northeast Asia and the Western Allies cannot afford a war on the Korean peninsula and will seek to avoid it virtually at all costs.

The admission of a nuclear program plays into this and from the North Korean regime's perspective the timing could not be better for it to parlay this admission into economic and political benefits to further sustain the Kim Family Regime. However, I think if we really peel the onion back we will see

that North Korea has a pattern of provoking the west in order to receive economic and political concessions. Provoke, talk, give in to the regime's demands, maintain status quo and some semblance of stability. This is the cycle that has occurred over the last few decades. North Korea has not changed and it likely cannot and will not change.

I strongly agree with the Administration that we should employ diplomatic efforts to reduce the threat but I am under no illusions that we will be very successful. Talking and negotiation is good and should be pursued; however, if we give in to North Korea's demands then we will face similar situations in the future as long as the Kim Family Regime is in power. For diplomatic efforts to be successful we must demonstrate our strength, even as we might go to war against Iraq. We must never give in to North Korean blackmail. The only thing the Kim Family Regime respects and fears is military power and we must never be afraid to demonstrate our power or the will to use it. We do not need to take immediate and direct military action, e.g. launching attacks across the border; however, we must consider reinforcing our forces there and letting North Korea know we remain committed to the defense of the ROK and stability in Asia. A start might be the reintroduction of combined exercises such as Team Spirit. We should routinely reinforce the peninsula with combat power and demonstrate both our will and our ability to defend the ROK from any form of aggression from the north. Once we demonstrate military power and political will we can negotiate from a position of strength and maybe, if we do not give in to unreasonable demands we can stop the vicious cycle we are in, in which North Korea conducts a provocation and we provide it with something it needs.

We cannot let our guard down and we cannot coddle the Kim Family Regime. We need to talk (and maybe a little softly) but we need to carry the big stick wherever we go. There will be no true stability on the Korean Peninsula until the Kim Family Regime is replaced. Yes, regime change is needed in North Korea as well as in Iraq. The problem is that the path through regime change to ultimate Korean unification is one that will be saturated with mine fields.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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