



Policy Forum 05-36A: What Should US Do About North Korea?



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Jason T. Shaplen and James Laney

CONTENTS

[I. Introduction](#)

[II. Essay by Jason T. Shaplen and James Laney](#)

[III. Nautilus invites your responses](#)

I. Introduction

Jason T. Shaplen, Policy Adviser at the Korean Peninsula Energy Organization (KEDO) from 1995-1999, and James Laney, U.S. Ambassador to South Korea from 1993-1997, write: "In Iraq, we had the luxury of destroying the regime first to bring about the change we sought. In North Korea the opposite is true. We must engage the regime first to end and ultimately reverse its nuclear program. We must therefore hold our noses in seeking to bring the North into the world community, including securing its membership in security forums, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank etc."

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II. Essay by Jason T. Shaplen and James Laney

-What Should US Do About North Korea?

by Jason T. Shaplen and James Laney

North Korea's leader Kim Jong Il is acting up - yet again. This time, he has shut down the country's 5MW nuclear reactor. The move could be for routine maintenance. It could, however, be the start of a process to extract plutonium from the reactor to build more nuclear weapons. The CIA believes it already has two bombs plus material for six to eight more. A third possibility could be a variant of the second: a bluff to strengthen his bargaining position.

In deciding how to respond, the administration would do well to remember the adage that to overcome your adversary you must imagine how it thinks.

Imagine, for example, you're Kim - the leader of an isolated country whose conventional military is increasingly ineffective, whose economy has collapsed, whose benefactor has pulled the plug on you, and whom the world views with contempt. Now pretend you have one card up your sleeve: a fledgling plutonium-based nuclear program that is frozen under a controversial agreement Republicans have never supported and a nascent, illegal uranium-based nuclear program to back it up. What would you do if the President of the United States:

- a. Lists you as one of three members in an "Axis of Evil" (the other two being Iraq and Iran).
- b. Implements a national strategy of pre-emptive defense, allowing for a first-strike attack against you.
- c. Employs this strategy to invade Iraq, which turns out not to have nuclear weapons, and depose its leader.
- d. Refuses to join European allies in engaging Iran - the other member of the "Axis" - whose nuclear program is far less developed than yours (even though he now says he doesn't oppose their efforts).

Now let's add one more factor. From his very first moment in office, the same president has distanced himself from the previous president's policy of engaging your nation while at the same time hawkish members of his administration have indicated that, just like Iraq, what they really want in your country is regime change.

As leader of this isolated nation in question, what are you going to do?

- a. Give up your nuclear program and hope that the president who despises you lets you stay in office.
- b. Sit by quietly while the president polishes off Saddam Hussein in Iraq and turns his attention to the "totalitarian" regime in Iran, knowing that when he's done in the Gulf, he'll likely come after you as the last standing member of the Axis.
- c. Unfreeze your nuclear program, build as many nuclear weapons as quickly as possible, and try to hold off what looks like a near certain attempt to force your country's collapse.

If you're sitting in Pyongyang, the choice isn't very difficult. Kim may be ruthless and immoral, but he is not stupid. He has acted as any leader would to ensure his and his nation's survival.

So where do we go from here? Attacking the North militarily isn't an option. We don't know where all of its nuclear installations and material are located. A military strike would also likely start a war in a region that is home to three of the world's 12 largest economies and approximately 80,000-90,000 United States troops. It would further rupture vital alliances, particularly with China and South Korea, our 3rd and 7th largest trading partners.

A hardline policy short of a military strike isn't the answer either. To date, the administration's muddled approach to North Korea has only elicited the very reaction it sought to avoid. In 2001, the North had zero to two nuclear weapons. Today, it has two plus material for six to eight more. In 2001, the North's plutonium program was frozen and monitored by international inspectors. Today, it has unfrozen the program, reprocessed the plutonium, and is on the verge of reprocessing more.

All this means that the only viable option is meaningful engagement, a policy we have, in fact, avoided by demanding that the North dismantle its entire nuclear program before it receives anything concrete in return other than heavy fuel oil it could use, but has demonstrated it can survive without. True, we have also said we will begin discussions on lifting economic sanctions and removing the North from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, but there are few leaders in the world foolish enough to give up the one card that guarantees their nation's survival based only on promises of future concessions by adversary they do not trust. Indeed, Kim feels he has been burned on this issue once already. While we - correctly - maintain the North violated its 1994 agreement with us, the North claims we, too, violated the Agreed Framework by failing to normalize relations and lift economic sanctions as envisioned in the deal.

To be sure, Kim knows well that he cannot survive without opening his country. While he has behaved deplorably over the past four years, he has also studied China and Vietnam to see how leaders there opened their economies without jeopardizing their hold on power. And he's begun to implement the market reforms he has studied, allowing the price of staples such as rice to float freely, raising wages in response to these increases, allowing free markets to operate, opening special economic zones, and more. The result has been modestly encouraging: visitors to Pyongyang report seeing more activity in stores, more goods on the shelves, and more cars - not to mention people - on the streets.

Kim can't do it alone, however. He has to have outside help. If the United States, China, South Korea, and Japan do not help him open to the world he will revert to whatever he has to do to survive, including peddling nukes or nuclear material for much needed currency. This would be our worst nightmare.

There are those who argue that we should deal with North Korea the same way we dealt with Iraq - i.e. use force to depose the dictator, clearing the way for the change we desire. Iraq and North Korea are very different nations, however. They require very different approaches. Most Iraqis despised Saddam. Even then, our soldiers were not greeted as liberators; they're still fighting in the streets. By contrast, most North Koreans, however misguided, revere Kim. They will likely fight to the death for him, resulting in a prolonged guerilla war. Additionally, the risks in Iraq were significantly less than they would be in North Korea. Saddam did not possess nuclear weapons and had a relatively small army. Kim has weapons and a massive 1.1 million-strong military. Finally, North Korea's border is located just 35 miles from the capital of one of our closest allies with more than 12 million people living in metropolitan Seoul.

In Iraq, we had the luxury of destroying the regime first to bring about the change we sought. In

North Korea the opposite is true. We must engage the regime first to end and ultimately reverse its nuclear program.

We must therefore hold our noses in seeking to bring the North into the world community, including securing its membership in security forums, the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank etc.

In taking this approach, however, we must make absolutely clear that we will engage the North only on the condition that it does not conduct a nuclear test or sell its nuclear know how or stockpile to others. Crossing this red line will bring the severest consequences immediately - with an iron-clad guarantee from China that it will not use its veto in the Security Council to prevent this. To be sure, the prospect of doing another deal with Kim Jong Il is unpalatable. But letting the situation spiral further out of control is unpardonable.

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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[Return to top](#)

[back to top](#)

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