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Commentary

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Congress is on the brink of killing off the last peaceful U.S. ties to North Korea. Then what?

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In Washington last week, tucked inside the cavernous hearing room of the House International Relations Committee, congressional frustration with the irredeemably difficult North Koreans was on vivid display. Last month, North Korea, always tough to love, rewarded Washington for its dogged diplomatic efforts by firing a satellite-bearing rocket, without so much as a warning, over Japan's head. Congress then summoned to this hearing America's hard-pressed negotiators to explain why the North Koreans act the way they do. (Honest answer: No one knows).

In truth, many in Congress, especially Republicans eager to embarrass the Clinton administration for engaging with North Korea, would just as soon bomb the last vestige of orthodox communism back to the Stone Age as spend another dime or minute on negotiations. Of course, due to old-time communist ideology and sheer ineptitude, the North Koreans have never really escaped from the Stone Age--carpet bombing not required.

The only exception to North Korea's underdevelopment is its overdeveloped, 1.16 million-man military machine, which targets longer range missiles on missile-defenseless Japan and trains artillery batteries on the nearby capital city of the South, Seoul. As a U.S. military source in South Korea explained: "They wouldn't just pour over the border as foot soldiers. The North's artillery would rain down on Seoul. Their Rodong missiles would slime the southern cities with chemical agents. North Korean special forces are already in South Korea, and they would do everything from

blowing up TV stations to killing South Korean leaders. The North has the ability to threaten South Korea in depth, not just along the DMZ. We'd stop the ground assault--it's the other stuff that would do the real damage."

The 1994 negotiations in Geneva that produced the framework governing relations between North Korea and the West didn't end U.S. economic sanctions, infuriating North Korea. Now, in fact, they might be constructing a secretive, subterranean nuclear project with a reactor perhaps capable of producing nuclear-bomb fuel. If so, that's it for the Geneva accord, known as the Agreed Framework. Congress won't continue funding of the deal whereby the U.S. supplies home heating oil in return for which the North agrees not to restart its nuclear weapons program.

With each passing day, that exchange, part of what is called Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization agreement, loses support. Hostile questions that used to be raised only by the dimmer end of the far right, exemplified by Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-Huntington Beach), are now being raised even by highly respected committee members like Christopher Cox, another Orange County Republican. The current policy is no bargain, but what to put in its place?

"The political posturing to wreck the Agreed Framework is irresponsible in the extreme," complains a disgusted Peter Hayes, executive director of [the Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development](#), a Berkeley-based nonprofit helping the famine-devastated North Koreans build a wind-powered turbine electricity system. Before leaving for North Korea last weekend, [Hayes](#) commented: "It makes it much harder to engage them cooperatively--to test their will to work cooperatively with the United States, instead of having to rely solely on conventional military threats and nuclear extortion as its means of communicating with the United States. Dumping KEDO sounds smart until you examine the alternatives. When the Republicans look over the precipice, they will conclude that jumping over cliffs is bad for your health."

Well, maybe. At the pivotal though sparsely attended House hearing last week, Republicans, who control the committee, complained that the negotiations with North Korea were being conducted on too low a level. Frustrated Defense Department official Kurt Campbell pointed out that top North Korean officials, including national leader Kim Jong-il, are rather anti-social, if not wholly closed off to the West: "There is no person in the world we know less about." To which wise-cracking New York Democrat Gary Ackerman added: "So where is Kenneth Starr when we need him?"

Sure. But all joking aside, the Lewinsky mess has made official Washington more meanly partisan than at any time in memory. Even though the South Korean government itself is begging Congress to stay the course--to keep negotiating with the North, as frustrating for all as it is--the Republicans may still wind up killing KEDO and the Agreed Framework. In its place, they have nothing to propose more substantive than a commission to study the issue. Brilliant. Said a U.S. diplomat at the hearing: "This whole thing makes me sick, it's become so partisan." After the hearing, a stoic but clearly dejected U.S. diplomat, caught between the lines of North Korea and Congress, was asked how he felt about having to negotiate with a "completely insane government"--meaning, of course, North Korea. Not missing a beat, the diplomat replied: "Which one?"

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