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THREAT ANALYSIS – NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

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THREAT ANALYSIS – NORTH KOREAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

Introduction

Joel S. Wit, in his analysis of U.S. North Korean policy, stated that, “For 50 years, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been the poster child for rogue states.”¹ Whether called a “rogue state,” a “state of concern,” or a “failed state,” North Korea poses no shortage of military threats to the security of United States citizens and U.S. allies. An isolated, Stalinist regime, it possesses a large standing army and conventional weapons arsenal, a chemical and biological warfare capability, a developing a long-range missile program and a potential nuclear program. The North Korean nuclear program and the possible development of nuclear weapons endangers vital or core U.S. national interests. Analysis in this paper will focus on the U.S. strategy for dealing with the North Korean nuclear program at the end of William J. Clinton’s eight years as president and the start of George W. Bush’s presidency.

The framework for this analysis will be “A Design for National Security Strategy” contained in the National War College Course 5601, *Fundamentals of Strategic Logic*. This framework uses a five level approach to the design of a national security strategy. It begins with assumptions about the domestic and international environment. Level Two of the framework covers the National Interests and Threats. Levels Three through Five are focused on the Foreign Policy Objectives, Power and Resources, and Plans and Priorities, respectively. Finally, this paper will address recommendations for the strategy and means and methods to improve the policies for promoting stability in a vital region of the world.

¹ Joel S. Wit, “North Korea: The Leader of the Pack,” *The Washington Quarterly*, (Winter 2001): 77.

International and National Assumptions

East Asia is a vital region for the United States. As a region, it is a major trading partner of the United States with the value of annual trade reaching half a trillion dollars. U.S. corporations and investors have committed over \$150 billion in the area. The United States maintains forces of approximately 100,000 in the region, with 37,000 on the Korean peninsula. Additionally, some 400,000 other U.S. citizens live or work in the region. The U.S. has many long-standing alliances and security relationships with the nations of the region, particularly the Republic of Korea and Japan.²

In testimony before a Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Ambassador Wendy R. Sherman stated that, “the Korean Peninsula remains one of the most volatile areas in the world. . . the Cold War endures. There is no peace but an armed truce.”³ The U.S. recognized the threat of the North Korean nuclear program and the destabilizing effect it had on a critical region of the world. In 1994, the United States and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework freezing the known DPRK nuclear weapons material production. In return for this agreement, the U.S. committed to arrange the provision (construction) of two light water reactors and interim provision of heavy fuel oil for electrical generations needs. The protocol eventually calls for the dismantling of North Korea’s plutonium producing facilities.⁴ In April of 2000, a team from the United States completed the canning of all accessible spent fuel rods and

² Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Proliferation: Threat and Response* (Washington, D.C., January 2001), 7.

³ Wendy R. Sherman, “Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs,” 21 March 2001, Department of State, Washington, D.C., 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

fragments. However, “the United States believes North Korea produced and diverted sufficient plutonium for at least one nuclear weapon prior to the agreement.”⁵

There are several international actors whose national interests must be taken into account when dealing with North Korea. The Republic of Korea (ROK) is a long-standing ally, and recognizes the destabilizing effect of North Korean nuclear weapons. The U.S. supports President Kim Dae Jung’s “sunshine policy,” a revolutionary shift that highlights some of the ROK concerns, including reunion of families and reactivation of joint committees. South Korea’s role in the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) and the more recent Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group (TCOG) are central to the regional success.⁶ The vital interests of Japan are similar, but not identical to the U.S. interests. Recent North Korean missile launches have raised the stakes for Japan. Significantly, these launches caused concern about their commitment to U.S. policies with regard to North Korea, but Japan remains engaged through the multi-lateral process.⁷ Finally, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) has several interests in the stability of the Korean Peninsula. First, the PRC considers the Korean peninsula within their historical sphere of influence. They also have an interest in controlling the impetus or justification for U.S. missile defense programs, and a desire as an existing nuclear power under the nonproliferation regime to prevent other regional states from developing nuclear arms.⁸

⁵ DoD, *Proliferation*, 9.

⁶ William J. Perry, Department of State, *Review of United States Policy Toward North Korea: Findings and Recommendations*, (Washington, D.C., 12 October 1999), 4.

⁷ Sherman, 4.

⁸ Perry, 5.

Since the mid-1970's, North Korea has appeared to be in a continual state of teetering on the brink of collapse. Yet it has managed to leverage its relative weaknesses into survival. It has used brinksmanship, its enigmatic nature, and a perception of irrationality as sources of international power. It has demonstrated an ability to absorb sanctions through national deprivation. Of the "rogue nations" (Iran, Iraq, Cuba, Libya, and North Korea), it is the only one that is currently party to a level of even limited engagement. Engagement empowers the target state. In its weakness, it has power as "a key arbiter of success. . . (to) unilaterally. . . jettison engagement. . . (and) make further progress untenable for U.S. politicians."⁹

In the domestic environment, President George W. Bush entered the White House in January of 2001, without a mandate after the conclusion of a contested presidential election. He initially focused on his domestic agenda, primarily a tax reduction package in the face of an economic slowdown. He also must deal with a closely divided Congress that has become more active in its role in international relations. In the best of times, Congress views the domestic agenda as taking precedence over international relations. The slowdown in the economy and its impact on government revenues, and the perceived impact of the tax reduction on long-term deficit/surplus will impact any international policy dealing with foreign aid or funding for incentives to communist North Korea.

National Interests and Threats

In December of 1999, the Clinton Administration published the National Security Strategy, "A National Security Strategy for a New Century." It stated, "our national interests fall into . . . categories. The first includes **vital interests** - Among these are the physical security of our

⁹ Meghan L. O'Sullivan, The Politics of Dismantling Containment, The Washington Quarterly, (Winter 2001): 73.

territory and that of our allies, the economic well-being of our society, and the protection of our critical infrastructures.”¹⁰ In addition to vital interests, the national security strategy listed secondary or “**important national interests**. These . . . do not affect our national survival, but they do affect our national well being and the character of the world in which we live. . . for example, regions in which we have a sizable economic state or commitments to allies.”¹¹ Given the treaties and bilateral agreements with both Japan and Korea, the U.S. forces and citizens in the region, and the economic trade with these nations, President Clinton has clearly defined both a vital and an important national interest in this region.

The administration of President George W. Bush has yet to publish its new national security strategy. However, they have begun to piece together the parts of the strategy that will define their view of the national interests. In March of 2001, President Bush directed “a full review of our relationship with North Korea, coming up with policies that build on the past, coming up with policies unique to the administration, the other things we want to see put on the table.”¹² That review was completed in June of 2001, with the administration offering to restart the negotiations with North Korea. Among the goals stated included “implementation of the Agreed Framework relating to North Korea’s nuclear activities.”¹³ Assuming that the U.S. national interests are relatively unchanging, the security of United States citizens and U.S. allies,

¹⁰ President, National Security Strategy, “A National Security Strategy for a New Century,” (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, December 1999), 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 1.

¹² President, Press Release, “Remarks by Secretary of State Colin Powell to the Pool,” interview by the White House press pool, 7 March 2001, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Washington, D.C.

¹³ Steven Mufson, “U.S. Will Resume Talks with N. Korea: Decision Follows 3-Month Review,” The Washington Post, 7 June 2001, sec. A.1.

and the stability of a major regional trading partner will remain core U.S. national security interests under President Bush.

The threat of a nuclear North Korea has numerous impacts throughout the world. The Secretary of Defense described the basis of the North Korean nuclear threat in his report on proliferation. He listed the following aspects of their nuclear program in the table below:

North Korea: NBC Weapons and Missile Programs	
Nuclear	Plutonium production at Yongbyon and Taechon facilities frozen by the 1994 Agreed Framework; freeze verified by IAEA. Believed to have produced and diverted sufficient plutonium prior to 1992 for at least one nuclear weapon. Concerns remain over possible covert nuclear weapons effort. Ratified the NPT; later declared it has a special status. This status is not recognized by the United States or the United Nations. Has not signed the CTBT.

Source: Department of Defense, Office of the Secretary of Defense, "Proliferation: Threat and Response," (Washington, D.C., January 2001), 10.

The continued nuclear threat has the potential to undermine the international nonproliferation framework. Because of their economic problems, North Korea has a history of selling advanced technology to the highest bidder, including other unstable actors. It also would force Japan and South Korea to re-evaluate their posture with regard to nuclear weapons.¹⁴ In the view of William J. Perry, a nuclear North Korea would undermine the past almost 50 years of relative stability achieved by deterrence in the peninsula. It would "weaken deterrence as well as increase the danger if deterrence failed. . . (and) undermine the conditions for pursuing relaxation of tensions, improved relations and lasting peace."¹⁵

¹⁴ Wit, 79.

¹⁵ Perry, 3.

The security of U.S. citizens and allies and their economic well-being are core or vital interests. Regional stability in an area of U.S. interests of the level and magnitude of East Asia compound that vital interest. Therefore, threats to those interests are of primary concern to the development of the national security strategy for that region. The U.S. has kept the full range of tools from diplomacy to military force immediately available. The U.S. has maintained military forces forward deployed in the region, and has demonstrated the capability and predisposition to reinforce these forces. With the recent completion of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's working groups in preparation for the Quadrennial Defense Review, the relative importance of East Asia and the Pacific Rim have increased, not diminished.

The risks associated with the further development of the North Korean nuclear program are four-fold. First, the North Korean nuclear threat destabilizes the deterrent nature of the forces currently stationed in East Asia. While most estimate that the U.S. and its allies would win a military conflict on the Korean Peninsula, North Korean nuclear weapons make U.S. acceptability of the risk of nuclear conflict and massive casualties less certain. Next, the possession of nuclear weapons by North Korea would trigger a re-evaluation of neighboring countries' (ROK and Japan) policies with regard to nonproliferation. Because North Korea's economy is unable to provide for the well-being of its citizens, it has a history of selling advanced weapons and technology to other nations. This would destabilize the international nonproliferation regime. Finally, because of its use of brinksmanship as a method of diplomacy, there is an increased possibility of nuclear accident. All of these risks threaten core national interests of the United States.

Foreign Policy Objectives

During the Clinton administration, the U.S. strategy for dealing with North initially consisted of classical deterrence. In Korea, the Cold War never ended. U.S. forces, forward deployed with a ROK defensive-oriented military backed by the full range of American military options and strong regional alliances, are focused on deterring North Korea from invading the South. Several factors have forced a shift in that strategy. First, the overwhelming evidence of the growth of North Korea's nuclear program forced the negotiation of the Framework Agreement. This necessitated engagement in order to freeze and then work towards dismantling the nuclear program. The widespread failure of the North Korean industrial and agricultural economies has created a condition of need within North Korea of unprecedented levels. Finally, the election of Kim Dae Jung and the stabilization of Kim Jong Il created a possibility for mutual engagement between the two Koreas and, "creates conditions and opportunities for U.S. policy very different from those in 1994."¹⁶ The resultant strategy at the end of the Clinton administration has a base of strong regional deterrence with limited engagement on specific areas of high level interest to the U.S.

When the Bush administration announced its intent to offer to continue negotiations, its stated objectives appeared very similar to those of the previous administration. Not focused solely on reducing the threat of the North Korean nuclear program, President Bush has stated that he is looking for, "improved implementation of the Agreed Framework. . . in the context of a comprehensive approach to North Korea. . . encourage progress toward North-South reconciliation, peace on the Korean peninsula, a constructive relationship with the United States,

¹⁶ Perry, 2.

and greater stability in the region.”¹⁷ The objectives outlined in the statement by President Bush do not encompass a full National Security Strategy. However, they present a feasible option for execution because they are more limited than those proposed by President Clinton in his 1999 National Security Strategy. President Bush, more a realist than President Clinton, makes a more limited statement, with no direct support for a “democratic, non-nuclear, reunified peninsula”¹⁸ as outlined in the previous National Security Strategy.

As his goals/objectives are defined, the President will have an uphill fight to make his case to a divided Congress, in a period of economic weakness, and in an atmosphere focused on international terrorism far from the Korean peninsula. International economics may dominate the discussion. Without congressional appropriation support, the U.S. cannot fulfill its obligations under the Agreed Framework. Also, since Japan and Korea are providing 70% of the funds for the light water reactors, and both of those countries are feeling the effects of an economic slowdown, the long-term viability of the program can be questioned.

Power and Resources

The United States possess great potential power. The geography currently places the vast majority of the nation outside even the longest range Korean missile capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. The nation has a strong history of support for nonproliferation of nuclear weapons. Even with the economy in a period of weakness, it still far surpasses any that of any other nation. With the United States in the role as the sole super-power, the office of the

¹⁷ President, Press Release, “Statement by the President”, 13 June 2001, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Washington, D.C.

¹⁸ President, National Security Strategy, “A National Security Strategy,” 35.

President of the United States conveys enormous prestige in international affairs. All these factors provide a number of means to select from for dealing with North Korea's nuclear threat.

But, deterrence and limited engagement of North Korea requires more than the perception of power. It requires the mobilization and use of actual elements of power. The U.S. has used its diplomatic power to negotiate secure relationships with friendly nations in East Asia, notably South Korea and Japan. The Agreed Framework was the culmination of months of negotiations with North Korea, including the supporting KEDO agreements with Japan and South Korea. The U.S. continues to use its diplomatic power to keep its allies engaged, and to communicate its intentions to regional actors and powers such as the PRC and Russia. Another element of power in use to prevent the growth of the Korean nuclear program is the economic element of power. U.S. economic aid in the form of food and heavy fuel oil, and support of the development of the light water reactors mark substantial investment of capital. Additionally, in September of 1999, and again in June of 2000, the U.S. eased its economic sanctions with North Korea in order to improve relations and to support the Agreed Framework.¹⁹ The informational element of power is important to maintaining support for the limited engagement, especially for the domestic audience. With the economic slowdown, it is important to highlight the financial contributions of Japan and Korea, as Amb. Sherman did in her testimony to Congress.²⁰ Finally, the U.S. will continue to keep a deterrent force forward deployed in this region. These troops represent the most visible use of the military element of power.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Treasury, Office of Foreign Asset Control, *North Korea, What You Need to Know About Sanctions*, (Washington, D.C., 18 August 2000).

²⁰ Sherman, 5.

The use of national power has costs. Deterrence is a high cost use of national power. It involves the actual use of military force in a forward deployment. This is high cost in terms of both national treasury and national will. Some of this cost is reduced through cost sharing and host nation arrangements with allies, particularly Japan. There is also a diplomatic cost of forward-deployed forces as shown by recent relations with the host nation over forces stationed in Okinawa. The economic sanctions maintained against North Korea do not have a substantial cost because North Korea does not have the economic base to be a major trading partner. Limited engagement is not a high cost strategy. Since the allies pay for a majority of the aid and development costs, the actual cost is much lower than that of maintaining a credible forward deterrent force.

Plans and priorities

The protection of U.S. citizens and allies and the stability of a region of vital economic importance to the United States represent core national interests. Those ends justify the use of all means of national power. The verifiable implementation of the Agreed Framework and elimination of the North Korean nuclear program are objectives that call for the coordinated use of power, especially because of the complex nature of balancing multiple strategies to influence an unpredictable actor such as North Korea. The U.S. must maintain its credible military, diplomatic and economic deterrence of North Korea. It must use diplomacy to support its traditional allies in the region who have similar but not identical goals, and achieve multilateral consensus. It must achieve an understanding with the regional power, China. And it must establish a balanced diplomatic and economic engagement of North Korea. It must also use informational power both to discourage the perception of success of international blackmail or brinksmanship.

This will not be a short-term strategy. Any dealings with North Korea take an enormous amount of patience and a great deal of time for even simple issues. There is no internal resistance movement within the DPRK to pressure the regime from within. Most of the sanctions have been in effect for decades without substantial impact. North Korea has demonstrated a pattern of holding out against deadlines until the absolute last minute in order to negotiate additional room for maneuver. And as long as North Korea maintains a large conventional military force, the U.S. will be forced to maintain its deterrent force on the peninsula and in Japan.

The first priority is continuing to maintain the clear, credible deterrence to North Korean nuclear program growth. The preeminence of the military element of power has kept the peace and relative stability of the peninsula since the end of the Korean War. That military power is matched by the strength of the alliances with South Korea and Japan. International alliances and treaties, such as the Nonproliferation Treaty, have a limited role in influencing North Korea, but do show international consensus on reduction of nuclear weapons. The strengths of the deterrent make engagement possible, but deterrence alone cannot achieve the desired end state. Deterrence can only set the conditions. Engagement is the means to eliminate the nuclear program. President Bush's challenge is to initially strike the balance between deterrence and engagement, and then try to gradually grow the engagement menu of options.

Recommendations/Conclusions

In November of 1998, Dr. William J. Perry headed an interagency group tasked to review and make recommendations on U.S. policy towards North Korea. His study group finally reported out in October of 1999. They recommended "a two-path strategy focused on our

priority concerns over the DPRK's nuclear weapons- and missile-related activities.”²¹ The first part of the strategy was to fully integrate negotiations against the two major destabilizing threats, nuclear weapons program and long-range missile development. It would outline a comprehensive series of reciprocal steps that the U.S. and its allies would take to reduce pressure on North Korea. The second part of the strategy acknowledges North Korea's voluntary role in the first part. Those threats that were not eliminated in the first part would force the U.S. and its allies to take measures to assure the stability and security of the region and contain the threat.²² The Bush administration's review resulted in a very similar position, differing in that they have added conventional forces to the agenda and called for stronger verification/inspections of the Agreed Framework protocols.²³

In her article, “The Politics of Dismantling Containment,” Meghan O’Sullivan argued for a more effective engagement policy with “states of concern.” She cites the lack of success in isolating these states through punitive policies. She further states that the primacy of the U.S. in military, economic and informational power makes incentives increasingly powerful as a tool of diplomacy.²⁴ My recommendation for the threat of the North Korean nuclear program would be to take the recommendations of the Perry commission and the stated goals of the Bush administration even further. Engagement strategy must eventually supplant deterrence for the long-term stability of East Asia. This will be a long, slow process. Negotiations with North Korea have tried the patience of countless diplomats and military leaders. But the U.S. strengths,

²¹ Perry, 7.

²² Perry, 7-9.

²³ Washington Post Editorial, “Engaging North Korea,” The Washington Post, 16 June 2001, sec. A.20.

²⁴ O’Sullivan, 67-69.

particularly economic power and informational power, must be leveraged to replace military power. With the other threats in the world, this remaining Cold War battle is an inefficient use of national power and will. Pushing a fuller engagement strategy will take significant increase in the informational element of power. Congress and the American people must be convinced the costs of engagement, the investment in stability, are worth the ends. The U.S.'s commitment to its allied nations must be continually reinforced. But the evidence of the impact of isolation and containment on other rogue nations and actors argues that those policies only fester hatred and defiance.

East Asia is an area of vital interest to the security United States and valued allies. That interest can be threatened by the development of nuclear weapons by North Korea. Since the Korean War, the United States and its allies have maintained a deterrence force to prevent North Korean aggression. The calculus of nuclear weapons forced a change in that deterrence and added engagement in an attempt to first freeze and then eliminate those weapons. Because vital interests of the U.S. are at stake, all elements of national power are engaged in countering the threat. While deterrence has kept the status quo for many years, it will take the full engagement of the U.S. and her allies to promote and ensure the long-term peace and stability of this vital region.

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