

Yes, Bush Has A North Korea Policy. It Might Even Work

<http://www.NewsAndOpinion.com> | Is it possible that the Bush administration knows what it is doing (or, as its critics would say, not doing) with its policy (or, as the critics would add, its lack of a policy) on North Korea?

North Korea -- starving, desperate for cash, fearful of being next on President Bush's evil-axis hit list -- has a nuclear weapons program and seeks to leverage that program into security assurances and money from the United States. Having lost its former Chinese and Soviet patrons, North Korea has chosen to be adopted by Uncle Sam. To ensure that it will not be ignored, it has embarked on a series of escalating provocations. It says it will deal only with America, and only in direct, bilateral talks. "If the U.S. truly wants the peaceful settlement of the nuclear issue," North Korea announced recently, "it should drop its absurd assertions and immediately opt for direct talks."



The administration counters that bilateral U.S.-North Korean talks are out of the question. The problem must be solved multilaterally. Meanwhile, the administration's attention and military resources are focused on Iraq. The administration's critics -- who by now include practically everyone, and his brother -- believe that Washington is haplessly stalling for time, hoping to have more options once Saddam Hussein is dispatched.

Time, they argue, is exactly what the administration does not have. Any day now, the North Koreans could restart their plutonium-reprocessing plant at Yongbyon. They could then manufacture enough weapons-grade plutonium from their stockpile of spent nuclear fuel rods to make six or more bombs within a matter of months. Once that material was manufactured, hiding it or -- worse -- selling it to the likes of Al Qaeda would be child's play. And North Korea has proved it will sell anything to anybody.

The Clinton administration was prepared to bomb the Yongbyon facility rather than see it start up. But military action could trigger a war costing tens or hundreds of thousands of Korean and American lives. "So," writes Nicholas D. Kristof in *The New York Times*, "if the military option is too scary to contemplate, and if allowing North Korea to proliferate is absolutely unacceptable, what's left? Precisely the option that every country in the region is pressing on us -- negotiating with North Korea."

"Bush cannot afford to ignore North Korea any longer; it's poised to cause a catastrophe," says *Newsday*. "U.S. needs to open bilateral talks," says the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* (and "very soon," since Bush "has no other options"). "U.S. must engage North Korea in talks," says the *San Jose Mercury News*. Thus say the critics.

Are they right? I asked a senior administration official

-- that is as much identification as the ground rules allow
-- to explain and defend the policy.

The official began by saying that the administration's goal is the irreversible and verifiable elimination of North Korea's nuclear weapons program. That includes North Korea's Yongbyon facility, its clandestine uranium-enrichment program, any nukes it may already have, and its stash of plutonium-rich fuel rods. "We are not interested in some sort of Agreed Framework Lite or some other temporizing arrangement which allows them to hold on to their nuclear weapons program."

Is force an option? "No president would rule out force as an option. The military option is a very low priority but on the table. The further they [the North Koreans] go up the escalating chain, the higher the military option has to be on our list of options." The North Koreans probably already have two nukes, the official said, and weaponizing plutonium takes time; so if the reprocessing plant goes online, the situation becomes steadily more serious, but it is not like going from virginity to pregnancy. There is still time for diplomacy to work.

OK, so where's the diplomacy? Contrary to much of what is assumed, replied the official, the administration's refusal to deal bilaterally with Pyongyang does not stem from Bush's dislike of President Kim Jong Il or from a dogmatic refusal to submit to blackmail. "It's really based more on our experience dealing with North Korea. We think that in a bilateral negotiation or dialogue with North Korea, we've learned that the other countries run for the hills. That's what happened in 1994."

(True, says Ivo Daalder, a Brookings Institution foreign-policy expert who worked on President Clinton's National Security Council staff -- and who is no fan of Bush's North Korea policy. Recalling the 1994 effort to cope with North Korea's nuclear threat, he said, "It was awful. Every time we got tough, they" -- other countries in the region -- "walked away, and every time we got weak, they got tough.")

The Bush official said, "We want this to be sort of like an alcoholic intervention, with everyone at the table saying, 'We can either hurt you or we can help you.' " By contrast, bilateralism may be a dangerous trap.

To make this clearer, I'll interpolate a little. (This is me, now, and not the Bush official.) Suppose the United States cut a bilateral deal with Pyongyang. Suppose Pyongyang then broke the deal -- not a big stretch, given that North Korea promptly broke the 1994 nuclear deal, and given that it clearly wants both to extort concessions for its nukes and to build the nukes anyway. Other countries in the region would immediately call for America to avert war by making yet another deal. Washington would have to either submit to never-ending nuclear blackmail or face the nightmarish prospect of taking military action, and quite possibly igniting a nuclear war, without its allies' support. Thus bilateral talks lead all too easily to precisely the catastrophe they are supposed to prevent.

To the extent that North Korea succeeds in bilateralizing its disagreement with the U.S., North Korea effectively succeeds in neutralizing America's allies, or even turning them. That should be obvious to anyone who has watched recent events pertaining to Iraq. At the end of the day, a

bilateral confrontation with North Korea may be inevitable. It would be foolish, however, for America to volunteer for one now.

But -- back to the official -- aren't China and other countries in the region running for the hills anyway? Calling for diplomatic pressure is all well and good; but, as the Star Tribune (like many others) says, "That approach has failed."

No, it hasn't, replies the official. "China, South Korea, Japan, Russia, and the E.U. have all told North Korea that reprocessing is a red line," the official said. "I think that has caused the North Koreans some pause, because the Chinese never went in this hard before, and neither have the Japanese." The prospect of diplomatic isolation may be part of the reason the North Koreans have not taken the fateful step of firing up their reprocessing facility. "They're flailing in all directions. The important thing is that, as far as we know at this point, they have not crossed the Rubicon of reprocessing."

Publicly, China has said it prefers bilateral, U.S.-North Korea negotiations. "For China domestically," says the official, "this is incredibly tough. However, we're getting lots of movement from China. We're talking to the Chinese now not about bilateral versus multilateral but about the modalities of making a multilateral approach work."

Meanwhile, on March 7, the South Korean foreign ministry told reporters that North Korea should "accept the idea [of] multilateral dialogue and seek dialogue with the U.S. within such a multilateral framework." So the region is moving, however grudgingly, toward collective engagement. If the U.S. were to offer bilateral talks now, all of that progress could evaporate.

Regional talks, the official said, could be modeled on the so-called Contact Group, a multinational council that confronted Slobodan Milosevic's Serbia in the 1990s. Serbia began by snubbing the group but then, seeing no alternative, came to the table. A similar multilateral council could offer North Korea generous inducements to give up its nukes once and for all, while also credibly threatening North Korea with economic strangulation and diplomatic isolation should it refuse. Pyongyang, rather than Washington, would then be boxed in.

Neither America nor Japan can credibly convene a multilateral council, because U.S.-led talks would seem bilateral and because both Koreas mistrust Japan. That leaves China and South Korea -- preferably China. I did not succeed in pinning down the official as to when and how either country could be induced to stick its neck out. He preferred to emphasize gradual movement in the right direction.

Well, it might work. It might not. The official succeeded in convincing me that bilateral U.S.-North Korean talks are not a shortcut but an ambush. What is not so clear is whether the ambush can ultimately be avoided. 