

# Lessons of a Nuclear North Korea

Last week, the White House announced that North Korea has admitted what critics of the Clinton “engagement” ruefully predicted eight years ago: Pyongyang retains a secret nuclear weapons program, in defiance of its 1994 pledge to forswear nukes. Since the disclosure became public, the Bush administration has been properly stern and sober, indicating that North Korea’s behavior must stop and must not be rewarded. But the administration has also felt the need to reassure us that North Korea is not like Iraq. Really?

In fact, both regimes are ruled by homicidal tyrants, engage in terrorism, and are addicted to developing weapons of mass destruction. It’s a mistake to argue, as one senior administration official put it, that “these regimes may share some characteristics, but Iraq is in a class by itself.” This only undermines the president’s own words, his own insight, and ultimately his own credibility about the “axis of evil.” Worse, it invites the president’s critics to ask, “If Pyongyang can be peacefully engaged, why can’t Baghdad?”

The truth is simpler: Both regimes are evil, irredeemably so, and the lasting solution to the threat they pose is a change of regimes in both places. The only difference lies in the means appropriate to the different circumstances. As is often the case in the real world, what makes practical sense in one instance may not in the other.

North Korea has nuclear weapons and a military poised to destroy much of South Korea. Iraq doesn’t have those weapons—yet—and its military is only a shell of its former self. Removing Saddam Hussein from power by military means makes sense because it is just, it is doable, and the likely costs to innocent civilians and American forces are low. Unfortunately, the same can’t be said with any confidence of an attempt to remove Kim Jong Il and to liberate North Korea. But that is certainly no reason to jump to the conclusion that we shouldn’t move ahead against Saddam—or that the only viable policy with respect to Korea is the failed approach of the Clinton years—“engagement” and “normalization” with Pyongyang.

U.S. policy toward North Korea has been a mess for a

decade and a half. In 1985, Pyongyang signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. By 1987, it was already playing games with respect to required inspections of its nuclear facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). By the early 1990s, there was sufficient intelligence to indicate that North Korea had an illicit nuclear weapons program. Washington’s reaction? Play down that fact, facilitate an agreement between North and South to “de-nuke” the peninsula, begin removing our own nuclear weapons from Korea, and cancel U.S. and South Korean military exercises.

By 1993, North Korea was openly in breach of the Nonproliferation Treaty and refusing IAEA inspectors access to its nuclear facilities. President Clinton huffed and puffed about not allowing North Korea to develop the bomb, but in the end he couldn’t get the inspectors back in. Fearing a showdown with North Korea, the Clinton administration attempted to bribe the North into ending its nuclear weapons program by promising to build Pyongyang two new (supposedly less weapon-friendly) nuclear reactors, provide it with huge amounts of fuel oil in the meantime, and normalize economic and political relations. Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia Stanley Roth explained the logic behind the administration’s policy: “Who knows what actions North Korea might take if it were desperate?”

Not surprisingly, Pyongyang decided this was a pretty good scam. In 1998, it tested missiles that could dump warheads on both Japan and the United States. As the North Koreans probably hoped, the Clinton team raced to figure out what more they could offer as tribute, if only North Korea would agree to stop its testing of these missiles. By 2000, the administration was in full appeasement mode, with North Korea receiving more U.S. aid than any other nation in East Asia, and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, in a parody of Bob Hope’s “Thanks for the Memories,” ludicrously warbling at a regional summit: “Just had my first handshake, with Foreign Minister Paek. Used to think he was a rogue, but here at [the summit], he’s so in vogue.” Only the intervention of the 2000 elections prevented Clinton from going to North Korea to



Cheers! Kim Jong Il and Madeleine Albright

Photo credit

the Korean peninsula a safer place, and the large amounts of aid provided North Korea have actually helped prop up a regime that was on its way to collapsing in the mid-1990s.

Pyongyang has thus begun a new game of chicken with Washington. Admitting it has an ongoing nuclear weapons program and, as it says, even “more powerful” weapons, North Korea probably expects the United States to react as it has in the past, with new talks and new inducements. Instead, the Bush administration should begin to put in place a completely different agenda, one guided by the president’s own insight that one cannot solve the problem of North Korea’s weapons programs without solving the problem of the regime itself. To start, the United States and its allies should stop subsidizing the North

strike a new deal under which we would have been providing even more aid for the boon of a supposedly stopped missile program.

The Bush team came into office skeptical about the existing policy and the wisdom of the agreements in place. Even so, it was unwilling to repudiate the process of engagement. Bush officials opted instead for a more “hard-headed” engagement, in which North Korea was going to be asked to show substantial progress on a variety of security fronts—transparency, weapons proliferation, conventional forces levels—before the relationship could move forward. Whether this policy could have worked is doubtful: In the end, engagement trumps hardheadedness for the simple reason that if we stick to our guns with a state like North Korea, a confrontation arrives, and we face a fundamental choice between challenge and accommodation. It is only accommodation that keeps the game going, and so accommodation tends to prevail.

But now, with the North Koreans having been caught in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework and, in turn, renouncing that framework, the Bush administration has a new opportunity to fashion a more realistic and effective policy. This will not be easy. Following Washington’s lead, both Japan and South Korea have invested considerable political capital in engagement with the North. Nor will Washington itself—as evidenced by how closely held within the administration the intelligence was about North Korea’s cheating—want to provoke another crisis while confronting Iraq and the war on terrorism. This is understandable, but it shouldn’t result in some new version of past efforts. Engagement has not worked. It has not made

Korean government with fuel oil, foreign aid, and promises of billions in Japanese war reparations. Second, we should vastly increase Radio Free Asia broadcasts into North Korea from the current couple of hours a day to 24/7. Finally, in conjunction with allies and other states in the Pacific, we should put pressure on China to stop frustrating defections from North Korea. This is not only the right thing to do as a humanitarian matter, but it is also important to a strategy of undermining the regime from within. And more can, of course, be done as part of a new policy of aggressive containment of Pyongyang, including shoring up the defense capabilities of South Korea.

For almost a decade, the *New York Times*, the Clinton administration, and others have told us that the only sensible strategy for dealing with North Korea was engagement. But it hasn’t worked; if anything, it has actually increased the incentives for North Korea (and like-minded states) to develop as many dangerous “bargaining chips” as they can. This softheaded policy of engagement produces a world no one wants to live in. And certainly our current difficulty in confronting an armed North Korea shows precisely why dealing with Iraq and Saddam Hussein can’t wait. As President Bush has made clear over the past year, the United States has a fundamental choice to make in confronting rogue states, dictators developing weapons of mass destruction, and global terrorism: Either we act aggressively to shape the world and change regimes where necessary, or we accept living in a world in which our very existence is contingent on the whims of unstable tyrants.

—William Kristol and Gary Schmitt