



National Security Watch

NSW 07-2

26 September 2007

The Korean Peninsula and the Future of Eighth U.S. Army

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Introduction

For more than half a century, the United States has remained committed to helping the Republic of Korea (ROK, or South Korea) defend itself against external aggression. Modern South Korea is a far different country from the one that U.S. troops first entered at the beginning of the Cold War; it is now a strong democracy backed by the world's eleventh largest economy and sixth largest military. The Cold War is over, but the threat that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or North Korea) poses to Northeast Asian peace and stability is not. The collapse of North Korea that many U.S. observers predicted has not occurred, and North Korean nuclear weapons and missile technology—in addition to its large conventional army and special operations forces—make North Korea more dangerous today than it was before. The realignment of U.S. forces in South Korea is recognition that the U.S. commitment to securing Northeast Asian peace, security and stability remains relevant today.

Northeast Asia is of particular strategic importance to the United States as it is home to two U.S. allies and a rising China and contains a quarter of the world's population and economic output. Among other consequences, instability on the Korean Peninsula could/would: seriously endanger the South Korean, Japanese and global economies; cause a conventional war with the United States and its allies as pyrrhic victors because of the hundreds of thousands of U.S. and South Korean deaths; increase the likelihood of regional nuclear and missile proliferation; precipitate a North Korean nuclear attack; and/or threaten the stability of the greater Asian region, including that of another important U.S. ally, Taiwan.

This National Security Watch discusses the U.S. role on the Korean Peninsula and the future of Eighth U.S. Army in Korea. Although Japan, China and Russia should figure prominently in any discussion of Northeast Asia, this paper will focus mostly on North and South Korea; a forthcoming paper on the greater Asian security environment and U.S. Army Pacific will discuss these players in more detail.

Background

The Korean Peninsula extends over 620 miles south from the northeast Asian mainland, touching both Russia and China, with Japan to its south and east. Despite many invasions and periods of domination by its large neighbors, some form of a Korean Peninsula state has existed for several thousand years. Its fierce independence, arguably

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an adaptive survival method given its neighbors, earned it the title of “Hermit Kingdom” in the 19th century. Today, this independence can be seen in the Korean pride in self-sufficiency and homogeneity.

Since the end of World War II, the Korean Peninsula has been divided. North Korea (supported by the Soviet Union) and South Korea (supported by the United States) were founded in the fall of 1948. On 25 June 1950, North Korean forces launched a surprise attack on South Korea. The conflict pitted South Korea and 15 other members of a U.S.-led United Nations coalition against North Korea and China, with the Soviet Union also aiding the North Koreans. Before an armistice was signed on 27 July 1953 (a formal peace treaty has not yet been signed), the conflict killed an estimated 415,000 South Korean, 520,000 North Korean, 145,000 Chinese, 36,000 American and 15,000 other United Nations forces, in addition to heavy civilian losses.

North Korea. North Korea is a communist party one-man dictatorship, first built around Kim Il Sung and now led by his son Kim Jong Il. Due to the closed nature of its society, North Korean politics is at best difficult to understand, but any attempt to study or predict North Korean policy must look beyond Kim Jong Il to examine the competing power centers—the Korean Workers Party, the military (specifically the National Defense Commission) and the security apparatus—the family-based patronage system and the three generations of North Korean leaders in power.

Although it contains most of the peninsula’s great mineral wealth, North Korea has a very small gross domestic product (GDP) per capita (best estimates place it at \$1,800 purchasing price parity). It is dependent on foreign food aid and energy imports to avert a catastrophe, despite its declared policy of “self-reliance” (*juche*).¹ It is one of the most centrally-planned and isolated countries in the world, with an economy that is dominated by military spending (more than 30 percent of GDP, according to South Korean government estimates) and plagued with systemic problems.

North Korea is an egregious violator of international norms. Its population of 23.3 million endures limited freedom of movement within the country, human trafficking, forced labor and severe political repression—from constant surveillance and arbitrary arrest to torture and summary execution. There are an estimated 50,000 to 250,000 internally displaced persons and 150,000 to 200,000 forced-labor camp prisoners because of famine and government repression. Adding to this inglorious record, the government is accused of internationally trafficking illicit drugs, counterfeiting currency, selling ballistic missiles and missile technology—notably to Iran—and engaging in nuclear weapons proliferation with other countries.²

North Korea is the most militarized country in the world, with the fourth largest military: 1.1 million active armed forces (5 percent of the total population) in the army, navy, air force and special operations. The army dominates the other military branches, but there is some speculation that the navy is beginning to rise in stature.³ The military has nuclear and chemical weapons programs and is believed to have a biological weapons program as well. Despite its size and national importance, the military is plagued with poor training and discipline and outdated platforms. The military’s dual command structure—with both political and military officers—hinders decisionmaking and doctrinal and operational creativity.

The country’s “military-first” politics (*son’gun chongch’i*) signifies the high status of the Korean People’s Army (KPA). Kim Jong Il has maneuvered to co-opt its power to preserve his authority. Some observers suggest that although Kim remains the final decisionmaker, the military may have veto authority on certain issues; the relationship between the two may become more challenged as Kim seeks his successor and moves to implement some limited but much-needed economic policy reform.⁴

The North Korean military strategy is two-fold: one, to ensure regime survival, and two, to reunify the Korean Peninsula under North Korean control within 30 days of the beginning of hostilities.⁵ The North Korean military has strived to fulfill Kim Il Sung’s post-Korean War vision of the nation as a fortress, placing underground almost everything of military significance to a degree that is unique in the world. As intended, this subterranean infrastructure makes aerial or satellite intelligence gathering by foreign countries difficult to impossible.

North Korean Nuclear Capabilities. Between 1970, when North Korea's nuclear program began, and 1994, when the U.S.-North Korean Agreed Framework was implemented, North Korea was estimated to have generated enough plutonium for one or two nuclear weapons. Between 2002, when the framework collapsed with U.S. accusations of North Korean uranium enrichment,⁶ and February 2007, when a new nuclear deal along the lines of the 1994 framework was agreed to, North Korea is estimated to have generated enough plutonium for several more weapons. On 9 October 2006, it tested a small nuclear device.

Although North Korea has mastered the full nuclear cycle, it has likely made limited progress on the design, manufacture and delivery of nuclear weapons. It may have obtained nuclear warhead designs from the A.Q. Khan network, but North Korea is not yet believed to have a nuclear weapon designed small and light enough to deploy on a missile.⁷ On 5 July 2006, North Korea tested seven ballistic missiles, demonstrating a range that placed South Korea, Russia, China and Japan within reach. However, the test was a failure for North Korea's Taepodong II ballistic missile, which is designed to reach distances as far away as the west coast of the United States.

South Korea. South Korea is densely populated with 48.8 million people—more than double the population of North Korea. Like the north, it is ethnically homogenous except for a small minority of ethnic Chinese.⁸ South Korea has developed into a vibrant democracy despite periods of autocratic leadership, military coups and popular uprisings. The new era of South Korean democracy began with the 1992 election of Kim Young-Sam—the first time in 32 years a civilian was elected president. In December 2002, liberal reformer Roh Moo-hyun was elected to a five-year term as president, but he has struggled to implement reforms against parliamentary opposition, even within his own party. Some observers predict that the next elections—the 19 December 2007 presidential and the April 2008 National Assembly elections—will return the political center-right to power, after a decade of center-left rule.

South Korea has experienced record growth since economic reforms began in the 1960s and has 14 times the per capita GDP of North Korea. Through close government and business ties, carefully managed development, the growth of industrial conglomerates (*chaebols*) and exports, South Korea now has a GDP per capita of approximately \$24,500 (purchasing power parity), with around a 4.8 percent GDP growth. Its largest trading partners are China, Japan and the United States. Although South Korea is continuing to liberalize and deregulate its economy to remain competitive, the country's aging population and structural economic problems—such as strict labor regulations, underdeveloped financial markets and lack of regulatory transparency—are growing problems.

The South Korean military is composed of approximately 687,700 active forces in the army, navy, air force, marine corps and national maritime police. South Korea spends 3 percent of its GDP on the military and has increased its military spending over the past few years, but the military still needs to bolster its command and control, missile defense and intelligence capabilities. Its military strategy is focused on the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia, but South Korea has participated in many U.N. peacekeeping missions—such as the current one in Lebanon—and with U.S. coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq.

North Korea-South Korea Relations

Until the 1990s, most bilateral contact between the Koreas was limited to Red Cross and family reunification projects. Tensions were kept high by two terrorist attacks attributed to North Korea—leaving a total of 132 South Koreans dead—and numerous cross-border penetrations by North Korean forces.

South Korea seeks to remain engaged with North Korea through current President Roh Moo-Hyun's "peace and prosperity policy," using economic means to encourage better behavior from North Korea; this effort builds on South Korea's "sunshine policy" of the 1990s. Since bilateral trade was legalized in 1988, South Korea has become North Korea's second largest trading partner. Trade is mostly related to aid (such as fertilizer and rice) and

confidence-building cooperative projects (such as the largely symbolic development of inter-Korean road and railway infrastructure, North Korean-organized tours to Mount Kumgang, and the Kaesong Industrial Complex, which houses South Korean companies who employ North Korean labor). Although the projects are intended to open up isolated North Korea and improve the lives of average North Koreans, some observers question whether it is instead strengthening the regime's interests.

South Korea has pursued a parallel agenda vis-à-vis North Korea: the denuclearization of the peninsula and increased engagement. At times, these two agendas have collided, with South Korea restricting bilateral relations because of concern over North Korean nuclear proliferation. Multilaterally, South Korea participates in the six-party talks with North Korea, the United States, China, Japan and Russia to resolve the security issues surrounding North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

The reunification of Korea is an issue of particular emotional resonance for both North and South Koreans. However, there are divisions within South Korea—largely along age lines—about how cautious South Korea should be in its approach and what weight should be given to engagement versus security concerns. Both camps are careful to avoid any hard-line policies that might precipitate the collapse of North Korea, which would be a humanitarian disaster and a security threat to South Korea in and of itself. Many South Koreans believe that the North Korean regime is ultimately a benign power and that while North Korea's nuclear capacity should be eliminated, years of living under the threat of North Korean artillery in Seoul has numbed them to the issue's urgency.⁹ However, the expected transfer of South Korean government power to the political center-right in 2008 will likely bring to power those who demand more reciprocal actions from North Korea.

United States-North Korea. The list of U.S. concerns about North Korea is long—instability, chemical weapons programs, sponsorship of terrorism, drug trafficking, counterfeiting and human rights violations—but ballistic missile and nuclear weapon development are top U.S. concerns. There are more than a few states throughout the world that are governed by undemocratic leaders with equally egregious legacies but receive little of the attention that North Korea garners. The difference between North Korea and these states is North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons and its status as a U.S. adversary. **Although North Korean missiles do not yet pose a direct threat to the United States, the United States worries that North Korea could launch an attack against U.S. allies;¹⁰ provide nuclear weapons or related technology or material to other states or non-state actors; become a more emboldened regional power, using its weapons as a deterrent against U.S. attempts to contain it; or spur other regional powers to develop nuclear weapons to deter North Korean aggression.**

North Korea is opposed to the U.S. military presence in South Korea and sees U.S.-South Korean military exercises as a threat of invasion and a de facto denial by South Korea that it wants to reunify.¹¹ Observers speculate that North Korea developed nuclear weapons to deter an attack by the United States (North Korea cites U.S. intercontinental ballistic missiles and the nuclear-capable missiles carried by U.S. Pacific Fleet submarines as evidence of a threat). However, other observers, particularly in China, disagree with this theory, arguing that North Korea has sought nuclear weapons since the 1950s and does so for reasons unrelated to the United States—such as gaining national prestige, transforming strategic relations with its neighbors (i.e., China and Japan) or strengthening internal legitimacy.

The United States has levied financial sanctions on North Korea for its nuclear and missile proliferation and its support of terrorism, in addition to U.S. actions in the United Nations Security Council and the six-party talks. During the sixth round of talks in February 2007, the six nations agreed to a North Korea "Denuclearization Action Plan" (see box on page 5). Pyongyang has already used its nuclear weapons program quite successfully, stalling punitive action by the United States and the international community while building up its capabilities and obtaining more economic assistance from the United States in 2007 than it got under the previous nuclear deal in 1994.

For the United States, the agreement and subsequent bilateral meetings with North Korea outside of the six-party framework signal a marked change in its approach toward North Korea. Since 2002, the United States had taken a hard-line approach toward North Korea, seeking to isolate Kim's regime, but with the 2007 agreement and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill's talks with North Korean officials, the United States appears to be moving toward a policy of increased engagement. North Korea seems to be reciprocating, shutting down its main nuclear reactor at Yongbyon after receiving the initial shipment of fuel from South Korea and inviting United Nations nuclear inspectors back in the country. However, given that the 1994 agreement collapsed after a promising start, the long-term success of this agreement is far from assured. North Korea's initial miss of the April 2007 deadline for closing its Yongbyon reactor and the United States' and North Korea's differing announcements of the progress made in September 2007 talks point to the difficult road ahead to achieve the permanent dismantlement of all North Korean nuclear programs.

2007 North Korea Denuclearization Action Plan

In the 13 February 2007 agreement, North Korea agreed to shut down its nuclear facilities and allow International Atomic Energy Association inspectors to reenter the country, laying out a path of incremental progress toward the denuclearization of North Korea, sweetened by economic, energy and humanitarian assistance for North Korea—such as the initial shipment of 50,000 tons of heavy fuel oil. The agreement also included a pledge to start bilateral talks aimed at normalizing U.S.-North Korean and Japanese-North Korean relations and a pledge to negotiate a formal end to the Korean War. The agreement lacks in specifics (no prohibition against testing, no mention of the future state of the nuclear weapons North Korea currently possesses) and does not permanently disable North Korea's plutonium program nor address at all its alleged uranium enrichment. (In 2002, a U.S. allegation of North Korean uranium enrichment formally ended the previous 1994 agreement.) Supporters contend that the agreement's vagueness is its strength because it is only a first step and, they argue, something more specific could not have been successfully negotiated. Not all members of the six-party agreement are sanguine; despite its public enthusiasm for the deal, China is privately rumored to be concerned.¹²

The United States is also concerned about the nature of the North Korean regime. In the long run, the United States would prefer to see a democratic and united Korea, but the road to reunification is long, given the huge economic, political and social differences between North and South Korea and the staying power of Kim's regime (despite many years of U.S. speculation that North Korea is on the brink of internal collapse).

United States-South Korea Relations

As in South Korea's relationship with North Korea, the peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula is the principal focus of U.S.-South Korean relations. South Korea is a valuable U.S. regional ally and participates with the United States in various multilateral and bilateral forums aimed at preserving the peace on the peninsula and beyond. South Korea currently contributes troops to U.S. operations in Afghanistan and in Iraq, where South Korea has the third-largest military contingent. However, South Korea is set to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan at the end of 2007 and has been decreasing its force levels in Iraq as a result of domestic opposition.

Trade and investment and people-to-people relations are very important parts of the bilateral relationship. In addition to the sizeable South Korean diaspora in the United States, South Korean nationals comprise the largest contingent of foreign students in U.S. universities. The United States has the largest share of foreign

direct investment (FDI) in South Korea, and South Korean FDI investment in the United States is substantial (visible in Samsung and Hyundai Motor Company factory investments in the United States). South Korea is the United States' seventh largest trade partner and the United States is South Korea's second, behind China. The conclusion of the U.S.-South Korean Free Trade Agreement (KORUS) on 3 April 2007 bodes well for the further strengthening of the already strong bilateral trade relationship by adding an estimate \$20 billion per year to bilateral trade. However, both South Korean and American farm and labor groups largely oppose the deal.

Despite the strong bilateral alliance, there are some areas of contention. The South Korean public is often critical of U.S. policies,¹³ especially with regard to North Korea, and the United States would prefer to see South Korea take a stronger line with North Korea. The United States wants South Korea join the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI)—designed to interdict the transport of material for weapons of mass destruction—but South Korea fears its signing would upset North Korea and escalate tensions. The U.S. military presence in South Korea is also a target of criticism by the South Korean public—there were street demonstrations in 2002 and 2003 against the U.S. military presence—and current South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun was elected based in part on his criticism of the United States. Nevertheless, the U.S.-South Korean alliance remains solid.

Current Military. The United States and South Korea meet biannually in the Military Committee Meeting between the two countries' Joint Chiefs and annually in the Security Consultative Meeting between the U.S. Secretary of Defense and South Korean Minister of National Defense. Significant military exercises of United States Forces Korea (USFK) include the perennial Reception, Staging, Onward Movement and Integration (RSOI) (which simulates large-scale movements of military forces and equipment on/to the peninsula in response to a North Korean attack); Foal Eagle (which simulates the conflict in live field training exercises); and Ulchi Focus Lens (which is largely a computer-simulated war game involving the response to a North Korean attack).

As 80 percent of U.S. forces in Korea, the Eighth U.S. Army (EUSA) is the face of the United States military on the Korean Peninsula.¹⁴ EUSA is the Army Service Component Command (ASCC) to USFK—a subunified command of United States Pacific Command¹⁵—and is in charge of U.S. Army forces throughout Korea. Although Eighth Army's role as the warfighting headquarters ended along with the Korea War in 1953, it continues its mission to deter North Korean aggression and maintain the armistice that stopped the Korean War. Should deterrence fail, the EUSA mission is to support noncombatant evacuation operations and transitions to hostilities, generate combat power to support the United Nations Command/Combined Forces Command's campaign and provide combat service support to assigned, attached and other designated forces within the Korean theater of operations.

The military command structure in Korea is unique among U.S. commands—nowhere else in the world is the United States in such a combined command. The United States and South Korea—under the ROK-U.S. Mutual Defense Treaty of 1954—are committed to assisting each other in the event of an attack. Through the Combined Forces Command (CFC) that was established in 1978, they are jointly responsible for South Korea's defense planning. Additionally, the United States leads the United Nations Command (UNC), established in 1950 by the United Nations Security Council. The UNC oversees the armistice that ended the 1950–1953 Korean War and supervises the two transportation corridors that cross the demilitarized zone (DMZ)—the most heavily armed border in the world. The U.S. four-star commander leads both the UNC and the CFC.

Future Military. The U.S. military is realigning within South Korea to reflect the U.S. vision of the new global security environment, modern warfighting strategy and the increased capability of the South Korean military to assume full control of its defense during wartime. U.S. forces in South Korea will be reduced to approximately 25,000 and bases will be consolidated and relocated by 2012 (expected), largely to two locations: Pyeongtaek and Daegu. Currently, forces are too dispersed to be operationally efficient, too close to the DMZ to be tactically safe and too close to South Korean urban areas to allow local development and avoid friction with the local population.

The South Korean Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is scheduled to assume wartime operational control in April 2012.¹⁶ At this time, South Korea will establish the ROK Joint Operational Command and USFK will become U.S. Korea Command (KORCOM)—a joint warfighting command supporting the South Korean armed forces. The CFC's mission will end and, although the final details are not worked out, current plans call for the establishment of a Military Coordination Center (MCC) to share information and coordinate issues for the U.S.-South Korea security consultative process (i.e., the biannual Military Committee Meeting and annual Security Consultative Meeting—whose purpose will not change). The U.S. commanding general at the MCC will likely be a one-star. The joint defense system is expected to be similar to the current U.S.-Japan military alliance, but the level of defense ties will be higher.

Approximately \$10 billion will be spent on repositioning U.S. forces in South Korea and establishing the new command structure—South Korea is expected to contribute a significant portion of the expense. The United States will maintain and enhance its Patriot missile defense unit (to deal with the threat of North Korean artillery and short-range missiles), surveillance aircraft and other intelligence-gathering units and warfighting command systems located in South Korea. According to current U.S. Department of Defense-announced plans, EUSA is eventually slated to become U.S. Army Pacific (Eighth Army)—the Army Service Component Command to U.S. Pacific Command—when EUSA stands down in Korea. The former EUSA in Korea is slated to become Operational Command Post–Korea.

Implications for the United States

The United States has four principal interests with regard to the Korean Peninsula and the greater Northeast Asian region:

- maintaining its role as major power in Asia;
- preserving the peace;
- setting conditions for a peaceful reunification of Korea; and
- promoting stability, democracy and a free-market economy.

Within these interests, **U.S. policy is focused on four major issues:**

- expanding trade and investment with South Korea;
- freezing or reversing North Korean nuclear proliferation;
- preventing a North Korean internal disaster from destabilizing Northeast Asia; and
- protecting South Korea from external aggression, specifically from North Korea.

The last three can be grouped into a larger category: the North Korean challenge.

South Korean Trade and Investment. Bolstering South Korean economic stability and deepening U.S.-South Korea ties through trade and investment are important to U.S. interests. The U.S.-South Korea free-trade agreement, KORUS, is the linchpin of this effort. It is particularly important given that South Korea gives economic considerations heavy weight in its foreign policy. Although negotiations have ended, the deal still requires U.S. congressional approval—with a vote expected in 2008—before it can be implemented. The South Korean legislature also must approve the agreement and, as in the United States, ratification will be difficult.

The deal is likely to face strong opposition in the United States, principally on issues related to access to the South Korean market for U.S. automobiles and beef. Despite its shortcomings, the United States should ratify KORUS because it would help solidify the U.S.-South Korean relationship—it would be the most significant U.S. trade agreement in 15 years and the largest free-trade agreement that South Korea has ever negotiated—and move it beyond its current focus on North Korea. The agreement is particularly important since the World Trade

Organization free-trade negotiations have faltered. East Asia will become only more economically important in future years, and the United States has been ceding Asian market share to European, Japanese and Chinese competitors. This agreement could reinvigorate U.S. trade with the region at large and set the standards for future free-trade agreements in the rest of Asia.

The North Korean Challenge. Because North Korean nuclear weapons would give Kim a catastrophic destructive force and increased international leverage, the nuclear issue overshadows all U.S. policy concerns. If Kim were to have a useable nuclear weapon, the other two top U.S. concerns—a failed North Korean state and North Korean aggression against South Korea—would become more disastrous, in the case of the former, and more likely, in the case of the latter.¹⁷ Because the Kim Jong Il regime’s principal concern is survival, a transfer of nuclear material or weapons by North Korea to states and non-state actors is unlikely. North Korea realizes that retaliation—most likely regime change—would be certain. However, North Korea is a poor, diplomatically isolated country; if it feels its existence sufficiently threatened or if a governance crisis diminishes its control over its nuclear assets, a transfer is possible. A more likely scenario involves a North Korean transfer of nuclear technology or expertise—under the guise of civilian commerce—for money, oil or a country’s promise to act as counterweight against the United States.

There are four general options for U.S. policy toward North Korea:

- do nothing and allow North Korea to keep its weapons program;
- force regime change in North Korea to eliminate the hostile threat;
- isolate North Korea to force the reversal/permanent freeze of its program; and
- engage North Korea to negotiate the reversal or permanent freeze of its program using threats and incentives.

Given U.S. interests, the first option is *not* an option; with North Korea’s ignominious track record, it cannot be trusted to be a responsible nuclear-armed state. The second option—regime change—is not a viable option in the near future and would not necessarily stop North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons. The sudden collapse of Kim’s regime that hopeful observers in Washington have been predicting for years cannot be counted on and should not be hoped for, as it would pose an enormous danger to South Korean stability. An invasion to topple Kim’s regime would likely precipitate a counterattack from North Korean conventional and unconventional forces that would cause a massive loss of life in South Korea—with thousands of U.S. soldiers stationed in the south among the dead. Also, there is nothing to guarantee that a post-Kim government would abandon the pursuit of nuclear weapons. If this option is not to be pursued, then even hinting at it could derail negotiations with North Korea and destroy chances that the nuclear issue could be resolved peacefully.

The United States could also isolate North Korea—the third option—by increasing and strengthening international sanctions and pressure. Isolation would deliver the clear message that North Korea will not be accepted as a legitimate nuclear power and punish North Korea for its flouting of international law. However—as the past has demonstrated—this approach has its limitations because China and Russia are unwilling to support strong action against North Korea. Isolation also risks strengthening the hand of supporters of the nuclear program by convincing North Korea that retaining its nuclear program is essential to remaining safe and weakening the power of those within North Korea who seek to build better relationships with the international community. It is possible that North Korean nuclear weapons are largely a domestic political tool, used to strengthen Kim’s support among the military establishment or the populace. If this is the case, then taking a hard line may actually be counterproductive to the U.S. goal of disarming North Korea.

The fourth option for U.S. policy could be described as bilateral engagement plus. The United States could continue its six-party engagement, supplement it with bilateral talks and use “carrots” (the promise of economic aid and U.S. security guarantees) and “sticks” (the threat of sanctions and targeted strikes) to negotiate a per-

manent freeze—if not the full abandonment—of North Korea’s nuclear weapons program. The goal of such engagement should not be unrealistic; maintaining a freeze of the North Korean nuclear program is a worthy goal. Negotiations are unlikely to change the North Korean calculus for nuclear weapons in the near term, but step-by-step, reciprocal progress is possible. Bilateral talks would not be used as a carrot themselves, but would be a means to ascertain the price for which North Korea would abandon its nuclear weapons program and open the discussion to broader security issues. Some signs indicate that the Bush administration may be taking this approach—Assistant Secretary of State Hill’s visit to North Korea in June and subsequent talks with North Korean officials in Geneva in September are good signs.

The United States could offer North Korea increased bilateral economic and political engagement and formal security assurances in return for North Korea’s “good behavior.” Currently, the United States maintains the right of “first use” against North Korean conventional forces and refuses to rule out the possibility that tactical nuclear weapons could be redeployed to South Korea. But if the United States were to voice its willingness to create a Korean Peninsula nuclear-free zone, it would test North Korea’s claim that it would be willing to abandon its nuclear program if the United States removed its nuclear umbrella from the peninsula.¹⁸ Although the United States must be careful about approaching North Korea with too many incentives so soon after its nuclear test, it should also provide some face-saving path for North Korea. The normalization of relations and the provision of concrete incentives could provide this path. In this respect, the February agreement is a step in the right direction. Any further North Korean attempts to obfuscate or stall progress could be helpful to gaining Chinese and Russian support for punitive measures.

An effective U.S. policy should employ sticks along with carrots. Although sanctions are ineffective coercive tools by themselves, they are useful as a part of a broader policy that uses both carrots and sticks. Targeted strikes, like sanctions, will not by themselves convince North Korea to freeze or abandon its nuclear programs. The lack of accurate intelligence on North Korea and the underground locations of its significant military assets diminishes the chances that strikes could succeed. The complete destruction of North Korea’s nuclear capacity is highly unlikely, and there is no military option that could prevent them from building up the capacity, perhaps at a faster pace than before, as U.S. strikes would surely convince them that the United States was a threat. Although China, Russia, Japan and South Korea would oppose such action because of the fallout risk involved—a new Korean war that could kill hundreds of thousands and destroy the regional economy—international support for strikes would be easier to gather if a serious engagement effort by the United States failed.¹⁹ If the United States does adopt the engagement approach, the difficult decision will be when to deem engagement a failure, because at that point, military action must be considered.

The limits of policy to persuade North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program are clear. When existing nuclear-armed powers seek to keep or upgrade their nuclear arsenals, the message is that nuclear weapons are still a legitimate military tool. Despite the pledges made by the five declared nuclear powers in the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to negotiate nuclear disarmament (Article Six), it may be an inescapable fact that once such a powerful weapon is invented, it is here to stay. However, the ramifications of this should be carefully noted: Since the great nuclear-armed powers consider nuclear weapons to be legitimate, it follows rationally that the countries without nuclear weapons will seek to gain this “legitimate” military tool. It should not be surprising that it may be impossible for nuclear-armed states to convince North Korea to give up their weapons altogether.²⁰

Military Implications

Because a credible military deterrent must be maintained in South Korea to back up any U.S. policy, the U.S. military realignment is extremely important and must be managed carefully. There is some concern that the transfer of wartime operational control to South Korea has failed to account for the role of the UNC. Although the UNC only has 60 assigned soldiers, it provides the international legal framework for the mobilization of

multinational reinforcements if conflict is resumed. The commander of USFK has warned that with the changes to the U.S. and South Korean commands, the entire command structure—as it relates to the UNC—must be clarified to credibly maintain the armistice.²¹ However, any action within the United Nations on this issue would likely be seen by North Korea as provocative. To avoid jeopardizing any progress on the nuclear issue, the United States should avoid taking action within the United Nations.

After the transfer of wartime operational control to South Korea, the U.S. military will shift to a supportive role, one which might demand an increased U.S. Navy and Air Force presence. The real U.S. deterrent capability will remain the 7th Air Force and the U.S. ability to leverage airpower from other places within U.S. Pacific Command. However, U.S. Soldiers will remain in South Korea for the foreseeable future because of the immediate threat of North Korea and the larger, long-term U.S. security interests in Northeast Asia. If the United States did not have troops on the peninsula, it would have fewer military options than it does today. Maintaining close U.S.-South Korean military coordination will be critical after the changes in the joint command structure and the drawdown of U.S. troops. A successful military deterrent will still require U.S. support.

The U.S. military realignment naturally raises questions about the future of the bilateral relationship. To counter the potential perception in North and South Korea that the U.S. commitment to defending South Korea is weakening, the United States should clearly communicate its enduring military commitment to the peninsula with private and public assurances to South Korea (and Japan).

Those with memories of the Korean War doubt the possibility that the U.S.-South Korean alliance could end. While this is not likely in the near future, the alliance is evolving and faces new security challenges and economic opportunities. Close U.S. engagement with the peninsula is required. U.S. interest and investment in the prosperity and stability of South Korea and the greater Northeast Asian region will remain a constant for years to come.

Endnotes

- ¹ Massive food aid since 1995—the total amount unknown—has helped stave off widespread famines but has done little to alleviate the country's poor public health and living conditions. This aid is tightly controlled by the state; in 2005 it terminated and/or restricted international humanitarian assistance operations, the result being that most aid (in the form of grants and long-term loans) now comes from China and South Korea.
- ² Evidence suggests that North Korea has had extensive dealings with Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Syria, Yemen and Libya on ballistic missiles and allegedly nuclear weapons technology in the cases of Pakistan, Iran and Syria. From Steven A. Hildreth, "North Korean Ballistic Missile Threat to the United States," Congressional Research Service Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Trade Division, updated 3 January 2007, available online at <http://www.fas.org/spp/crs/nuke/RS21473.pdf>.
- ³ Ken E. Gause, *North Korean Civil-Military Trends: Military First Politics to a Point* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 2006), p. 10.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- ⁵ Thomas B. Cochran and Matthew G. McKinzie, "Satellite Views of the Hermit Kingdom, New Perspectives on North Korea," presentation given at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 5 January 2005. Cochran and McKinzie list "defend North Korea" instead of "regime survival" as part of the two-fold strategy.
- ⁶ The existence of a North Korean uranium program is still debated, even within the U.S. intelligence community.
- ⁷ Khan, the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb, reportedly sold blueprints of a Chinese highly enriched uranium implosion weapon design to Libya and North Korea. U.S. intelligence believes North Korea may have traded this information in exchange for missile technology. Although North Korea's weapons are plutonium-based, the information would still be useful for its implosion design, and if North Korea does develop its uranium enrichment capabilities, the design would be of obvious value. For more information, see Siegfried S. Hecker and William Liou, "Dangerous Dealings: North Korea's Nuclear Capabilities and the Threat of Export to Iran," *Arms Control Today*, March 2007, available online at http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2007_03/heckerliou.asp.

- ⁸ A large number of ethnic Koreans reside outside of Korea—in China (1.9 million), the United States (1.52 million), Japan (681,000) and the countries of the former Soviet Union (450,000).
- ⁹ “Testing times; South Korea and the North,” *The Economist*, 28 October 2006, pp. 49–50.
- ¹⁰ Japan seeks to increase U.S.-Japanese cooperation on missile defense to counter North Korea. In March 2007, Japan deployed its first advanced Patriot missile defense system and plans to deploy approximately 30 mobile PAC-3 launchers throughout the country by 2010, in large part in response to the North Korean threat.
- ¹¹ U.S. observers see North Korea’s objections as an attempt to create friction in U.S.-South Korean relations.
- ¹² Even China does not want North Korea to keep its nuclear weapons in the long term, although there could arguably be some mixed feelings about that. China’s concern is how North Korea might affect that region’s strategic balance and therefore influence the fate of Taiwan. While concerned about the proximity of a nuclear-armed state with millions of starving people, at the same time China also sees North Korea as a buffer between U.S. forces in South Korea and as a distracter for the United States, which has become increasingly more cautious in its outlook toward China. A nuclear-armed North Korea would only further restrain U.S. ability to intervene in a conflict over Taiwan or in the region in general. Arguably, the status quo seems most beneficial to China: it wants North Korea neither toppled nor too strong. “Survey: Here comes trouble,” *The Economist*, 31 March 2007, p. 15.
- ¹³ The younger South Korean generation is particularly critical of United States policy.
- ¹⁴ More information about Eighth U.S. Army is available online at <http://8tharmy.korea.army.mil/>.
- ¹⁵ The Commander of USFK also serves as Commander in Chief of the United Nations Command (CINCUNC) and the CFC. As CINCUNC, he is responsible for maintaining the armistice agreement that suspended the Korean War on 27 July 1953. USFK includes more than 85 active installations in the Republic of Korea. Major U.S. units in South Korea include the Eighth U.S. Army and Seventh Air Force.
- ¹⁶ South Korea has had peacetime control of its forces since 1994.
- ¹⁷ Some observers theorize that narrow focus on the nuclear issue obscures the larger security issue for the Korean Peninsula. They argue that negotiating a formal peace agreement to end the Korean War would help start this discussion. However, negotiating such a treaty would be complicated—China, the United States, South Korea and North Korea would all have to be parties to this agreement—and would be too ambitious given the current climate.
- ¹⁸ This issue is also complicated by the fact that China and the United States would also need to negotiate a bilateral “no first-use” agreement, which could involve a discussion of Taiwan as well. The use of chemical and biological weapons would also likely need to be banned. Selig S. Harrison, “The Forgotten Bargain,” *World Policy Journal*, Fall 2006, pp. 1–13.
- ¹⁹ Richard N. Haass, “Regime Change and Its Limits,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2005, pp. 66–78.
- ²⁰ Only one signatory to the NPT (South Africa) succeeded in developing nuclear weapons capability and then decided to give it up. South Korea, Argentina, Brazil and Taiwan abandoned their nuclear programs before developing weapon capabilities. South Africa was under significant international pressure and needed the money being spent on their nuclear program to modernize their forces. (Harrison, “The Forgotten Bargain.”) Also, it should be noted that South Africa’s security environment had significantly improved before they gave up their bomb. (“South Africa’s Nuclear Weapons Program,” David Albright, MIT Security Studies Program Seminar Series, 14 March 2001, available online at http://web.mit.edu/ssp/seminars/wed_archives_01spring/albright.htm.)
- ²¹ Andrew Salmon, “U.N. Left Out of Plans for Korea,” *Washington Times*, 22 January 2007.

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