Curbing the North Korean Threat
The U.S. must stop aiding its military.

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Will President Bush use our military to retaliate against Pyongyang's provocations or swallow his pride and pay diplomatic tribute to curb North Korea's nuclear activities? These are the questions the press is now asking. The real options, however, remain off stage.

Certainly, targeting North Korea's known bomb-making facilities makes little sense. It not only risks a more frightening North Korean counterstrike against South Korea's own reactors, but a complete breakdown of our security relations with Tokyo and Seoul. Bombing what we can target also leaves Pyongyang with what we can't - one or more covert suspect bombs and a set of hidden uranium weapons plants that could make several more bombs a year.

Giving North Korea the non-aggression pact it's seeking - i.e., one that would recognize and treat it as America's "equal" - on the other hand, would only confirm to the world's nuclear wannabes (starting with Iran) that going nuclear gets you what you want. Pyongyang, after all, is not just pleading out of fear. It hopes that if it can get Washington to formally agree that North Korea is no longer a military threat, allied support for stationing U.S. troops on the peninsula will implode. This, Pyongyang knows, would give it a freer hand over the South in unifying Korea.

Why, then, would anyone suggest such alternatives?

Fear. Pyongyang may make more nuclear weapons. It may export its nuclear capabilities (North Koreans recently were sighted at Iran's uranium-enrichment plants). It may fire nuclear-capable rockets over its neighbors, or devise new ways to provoke the U.S.

All of these threats are real. None, however, is worth jeopardizing our alliances with Japan and South Korea over, which is exactly what we'll risk if we start a war that's unwinnable without them. Each of the threats, moreover, can be mitigated if the U.S. and its friends act now to rein in Pyongyang.

How? First, protect our troops and allies. Despite North Korea's recent military interception, the U.S. should continue its reconnaissance flights off the peninsula - if necessary, with fighter escorts - to warn against possible North Korean action. The U.S. should also back Tokyo's claimed right to preempt North Korea's
launching of nuclear-capable missiles if Washington has reason to believe these rockets are carrying nuclear warheads. So long as Pyongyang has one or more nuclear weapons and is threatening us with nuclear war, shying from these steps will only signal U.S. weakness and invite Pyongyang to probe further.

Second, we and our allies should stop helping North Korea’s military. Two weeks ago, Japan’s foreign minister pleaded with the U.N. to do more to block Pyongyang’s illicit-drug exports to Japan. This trade, which violates international strictures against selling drugs, is conducted entirely by North Korea’s military and annually nets it several hundred million dollars in hard currency. Pyongyang spends a good portion of this money to acquire foreign parts and technology that it still needs to complete its two unfinished military reactors, its uranium-bomb plants, and its long-range missiles. North Korea’s share of the Japanese illicit-drug market is estimated to be approaching 50 percent.

Then, there’s Seoul’s cash transfers. Hyundai, South Korea’s most subsidized entity and the largest corporate sponsor of Seoul’s "sunshine" policy, is reported to have funneled $1.7 billion directly to Pyongyang. North Korea, in turn, has used this cash to feed its modernizing military. Like lax anti-drug enforcement, letting these cash payoffs continue is not only cynical, it’s dangerous.

The U.S., unfortunately, is culpable as well. We’re helping North Korea construct two large power reactors. Each of these plants is capable of making over 50 bombs worth of near weapons-grade plutonium in the first 15 months of operation. President Clinton promised these reactors in 1994 to get North Korea to comply with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). Earlier this year, North Korea withdrew from the treaty and was condemned by the U.N.’s nuclear watchdog agency for violating it. Yet, construction of the reactors and the sharing of nuclear technology - all useful to train the next generation of North Korean bomb makers - continues.

Washington’s diplomats, anxious to cut another deal with Pyongyang, want to retain the option of completing these plants. The result? Growing suspicions abroad that Washington is so frightened of Pyongyang’s growing nuclear capabilities that it’s less interested in enforcing the NPT than it is in possibly paying Pyongyang off again.

As with Iraq, which defied the NPT and now is banned from receiving atomic technology, Pyongyang’s nuclear cheating should also disqualify it from getting any nuclear reactors. The White House, however, has yet to announce publicly that it’s unwilling to waive the U.S. Atomic Energy Act, which forbids the U.S. from giving nuclear goods to NPT violators. Encouraged by this silence, South Korea and Japan continue to build the reactors hoping that Washington might still ship the U.S. parts and technology needed to finish them.

What else helps Pyongyang modernize its military power base? Counterfeiting, skimming from gambling operations in Japan, and selling nuclear-capable arms
and related technology to whomever will buy them. Together, these rackets earn its military hundreds of millions of dollars a year. Improved law enforcement in the region (with assistance from the U.S. Treasury) could help curb this trade as would passage of proposed and pending measures in Japan, South Korea, and the U.N. geared to make peaceful interdiction of this illicit commerce easier.

These steps, of course, won't eliminate the North Korean nuclear threat. Nor can they entirely preclude Pyongyang from making more atomic weapons or selling its nuclear capabilities. But they should alert other would be bomb makers - who have already misread our silence and are now chomping at the bit - that there is a price to be paid for violating the NPT and no reward for going nuclear. In concert with proper interdiction efforts, these measures also will make it more costly and difficult for North Korea to sell, perfect, or complete its strategic-weapons programs. Of course, if and when Pyongyang ever transfers a nuclear weapon or fires off more long-range rockets, support for taking tougher action will grow.

Until then, these modest steps, which require relatively little effort to put into motion, will help hedge against the worst without bombing or groveling. They won't scotch negotiations. They will, however, take certain things off the table – non-aggression pacts and reactors - that shouldn't be there. Also, acting on these measures now should make it easier to insist - as we must - that North Korea be deprived of any new benefits until it proves to the International Atomic Energy Agency and the world that it is entirely out of the bomb-making business. Finally, if Pyongyang continues to misbehave, implementing these measures should put the U.S. and its allies in a much better position to garner broader support to do more - something paying tribute or attacking militarily now would all but rule out.

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