



## **Iraq and North Korea: Disarmament vs. Deterrence**

by Michael McDevitt

Since North Korea's startling confession that it was developing nuclear weapons, the media has been inundated with commentary contrasting the approaches the Bush administration is taking toward eliminating weapons of mass destruction (WMD) from the regimes in Baghdad and Pyongyang.

From the outset, the administration's public approach toward the Iraqi WMD program has emphasized muscular options: either changing the regime, or more recently, insisting on forceful consequences should a new UN inspection regime fail. On the other hand, from the very beginning a "diplomatic" strategy oriented on globally unified diplomatic suasion is the chosen approach toward North Korea.

The strategic objective is disarmament - the elimination of Iraqi and North Korean WMD and, presumably, long-range ballistic missile delivery systems. Why the difference, since the outcome that Washington seeks in each case is the same?

The answer is because the realities in each case are very different. At the National War College in Washington D.C., where grand strategy is the intellectual focus, students are taught to examine strategic problems through the framework of ends, ways, and means. What strategic ends (outcomes) does one seek, what means, or resources, are available to achieve these ends, and what ways can those means be applied? Applying this framework to the different geostrategic circumstances of Iraq and North Korea illustrates the difference in approach.

Iraqi military power is essentially hemmed into the middle of that country, kept away from our allies Turkey, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia through constant, armed U.S. and UK combat air patrols that enforce no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq. Calling them no-fly zones is actually misleading. This air supremacy over much of Iraq creates de facto no offensive military operations zones, since any sign of offensive operations could be immediately attacked from the air. Iraq cannot easily lash out and attack its neighbors, whereas military ways and means are very much available to the U.S. and its allies.

Contrast this with Korea. The U.S. and allied aircraft don't venture into North Korean airspace. Unlike its Iraqi counterpart, the North Korean army is forward deployed and very close to the demilitarized zone (DMZ) it shares with the Republic of Korea, which means Pyongyang could launch an assault with very little warning. Seoul, the ROK capital, is so close to the DMZ that North Korean artillery can bombard the city, even without launching an all-out attack. While the U.S. and the ROK army have deterred a North Korean attack for 50 years, the ability of North Korea to impose politically unacceptable damage on South Korea has effectively taken military ways off the table, even though the means are available. It is not likely that any

government in Seoul would agree to even surgical strikes because they could easily trigger a second Korean War.

Geography also plays a role when considering the utility of economic ways in forcing North Korea to disarm. These ways are very limited. North Korea shares a long border with China. Trying to economically isolate North Korea can only be accomplished if China agrees to close this frontier. This is not likely since a cut-off of Chinese economic assistance along with international sanctions could bring about the implosion of the Pyongyang regime, or a desperate North Korean military roll of the dice leading to war. Beijing considers it more important to avoid either of these scenarios than removing WMD from North Korean hands. In the case of Iraq, the UN itself over the last decade has allowed the economic instrument of sanctions to become so eviscerated that economic tools are no longer a credible way to force disarmament.

The U.S. does not have the military and geographic leverage with Pyongyang that it does with Baghdad. It does not have significant economic leverage with either. The other strategic way is diplomacy.

In the case of North Korea, diplomacy is the only plausible approach to solving the problem. In the end, the UN may not be a viable diplomatic option toward Pyongyang. In 1994 when the U.S. was espousing sanctions because North Korea was in violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Pyongyang announced it would consider sanctions an act of war. Whether the ROK would have acquiesced in a sanctions regime, or whether North Korea was bluffing, will never be known since former President Jimmy Carter defused the situation.

The trouble with attempting to use diplomatic means to disarm North Korea is Pyongyang's history of dishonesty and cynicism regarding its nuclear-related agreements. It has not complied with the NPT signed in 1985, not complied with the non-nuclear agreement signed with Seoul in 1991 and not complied with the Agreed Framework signed in 1994. All these diplomatic instruments have failed because Pyongyang clearly never had any intention of abiding by them.

There is a slim chance that this time the situation may be different, because this time North Korea has actually admitted to cheating. By openly putting its nuclear program on the bargaining table, Pyongyang has made it clear it is willing to trade. It has even suggested some of what it seeks - a non-aggression treaty. Being open about its nuclear ambitions was a shrewd move. It makes it difficult for the U.S. to ignore North Korea and refuse to enter into a dialogue, so long as the U.S. objective remains disarmament. If diplomacy is the only way available to achieve the strategic end of disarmament that implies the need for intelligent bargaining based on interests.

On the other hand, if the U.S. objective were to simply deter the use of WMD rather than disarming, then refusing to be blackmailed into negotiations would be a principled and appropriate response to North Korea's admission.

In this situation, deterrence is the equivalent of strategic solitaire. But since unilateral disarmament through military means is not an available option, the U.S. is eventually going to be forced to talk with North Korea if we expect them to disarm.

So the administration will face the same dilemma the Clinton administration faced. If the goal is disarmament, or counter-proliferation as it used to be known, then one has to talk - even if you know going in that the record says the Pyongyang regime is a lying crowd determined to cheat. In other words, hold your nose and talk, or refuse to be extorted, ignore them, continue to deter, and worry about a nuclear-armed North Korea. There are no good choices here.

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