



A Military Option for Korea? by Thomas J. Hirschfeld

Bush administration spokesmen, including the president himself, seldom fail to say that “all options remain on the table” in dealing with the North Korea nuclear crisis; in other words, the “military option” is not excluded. What that option might consist of is less often specified. Resumption of war cannot be entirely excluded, sparked by some sense of imminent danger on either side (whether actually justified or not) or by frustration, inadvertence, or ill-understood internal politics in North Korea.

North Korea’s presumed strategy (it has few military options) is to threaten the destruction of Seoul through long-range gunfire from protected emplacements within range, and to threaten much of the rest of South Korea and Japan with ballistic missiles. Commando or suicide raids are another possibility. A massive invasion of the South (as in 1950) would be hard to mount and impossible to sustain. Whatever began moving by rail or road would be destroyed from the air. Thus, any U.S. attempt at destruction of North Korea’s nuclear infrastructure by air risks the destruction of Seoul, unless one can assure prior destruction of almost all the emplaced heavy artillery, and the many Scud missiles in the North Korean armory.

American heavy bombers were moved to Guam several months ago. Great improvements in bombing accuracy and all-weather target visibility, and the number of aircraft sorties apparently possible from bases close by and from aircraft carriers (some claim up to 4,000 per day, in contrast to 800, in Iraq) all suggest that a military option is feasible, at least according to former CIA Director Jim Wolsey and retired Air Force Lt. General Thomas McInerney (writing in the *Wall Street Journal* in August). There have also been plans for stopping vessel traffic at sea and for maritime and air traffic embargoes to stop trade in dangerous materials and weapon components. Training for such operations has begun.

Yet the military arguments against the exercise of a military option are compelling in themselves. The political arguments are even better. Unless we know where all the DPRK nuclear facilities are, there is no obvious benefit to destroying some, beyond perhaps delaying weapon manufacture while possibly inspiring immediate nuclear use. Even if it were possible to destroy a majority of the gun emplacements within range of Seoul by sealing their entrances from the air, there is no way to target the many, many ballistic missiles pointed at the ROK, only a few of which could destroy the five nuclear power plants within range (with predictable fallout over Korea and Japan). Maritime embargoes and blockades may indeed destroy North Korea’s external trade, but would do little about what concerns the U.S. most, the export of nuclear materials, which move easily in small packages.

Most compelling of all, barring an actual need for preemption, a strike on the North is unacceptable to our ally, the Republic of Korea, a quarter of whose population is concentrated in the endangered capital. Preventing such destruction is a prime ROK national interest; deliberately ignoring that would in all likelihood end the security relationship with the U.S. and with it, access to the bases and much of the military infrastructure supporting a war with the North. Acceptance of a U.S. attack by Korea’s other neighbors is also very doubtful. Yet if the actual exercise of a military option is unwise, its existence is useful. North Korea believes in the possibility of attack. The elimination or at least diminution of that possibility, by agreement, is one of the DPRK’s primary stated goals. What it is willing to pay for that remains to be seen.

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