

# NORTH KOREA AND NUCLEAR DETERRENCE

*Patrick Morgan*

Contrary to the usual view, deterring a state like North Korea is not really more difficult if it has nuclear weapons. Preventing North Korea from deterring a government like the US, or a UN coalition, is also not more difficult if the North has nuclear weapons. It is very difficult to make a decision to use nuclear weapons. It is especially difficult if a government is devoted to its survival, will certainly cease to exist if it uses nuclear weapons (the reaction would be so extreme), and its opponents may not react so harshly if it decides not to use nuclear weapons. This is the situation the North will be in with a modest number of nuclear weapons. Thus those who pressure the North should stop short of threatening its existence. And the North should take seriously the current opportunity to negotiate a settlement of the Korean problem.

Since early in the nuclear age, when it was suggested that states would soon have to *rely on nuclear deterrence* to keep safe, the idea of doing so has aroused uneasiness, particularly on the grounds that this is too static and leaves too much of the responsibility for national secu-

rity in the hands of another state, one that may be a dangerous opponent. Simultaneously, the idea of *not being able to rely on deterrence* has also aroused uneasiness, often leading to efforts to develop nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to gain more control over threats to national security. Finally, the idea of *being deterred*, of having foreign policy options constrained by others' threats of retaliation, has also aroused uneasiness in various governments, leading to efforts to escape from nuclear deterrence of others via such steps as developing a preemptive attack capability and strategy or a national missile defense system.<sup>1</sup> Thus, for various states at various times, nuclear deterrence has been disturbing when it seemed unavoidable, unavailable, or too available.

All of this has repeatedly evidential in the relationship between North Korea on the one hand and the US and its allies in Northeast Asia on the other. Deterrence has, of course, contributed a good deal to the prevention of another Korean War which is very important. However, on both sides the uneasiness with deterrence in general and especially with nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence has been profound, reflecting and then also contributing to tension and hostility among the states in the area. Both as a real phenomenon and as a prospective additional development, deterrence has frequently provoked fears and resentments. Because of this, deterrence, and particularly nuclear deterrence, was never fully accepted as just a stabilizing factor in the Korean situation and often is not seen as such now. Along with being a way of coping with the conflict, therefore, it is at least partly responsible for it as well.

To see how this has been so, we can briefly review the relevant history pertaining to deterrence, conventional and nuclear, in relation to the Korean peninsula. To start with, the outbreak of the Korean War in

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1 The best analysis of this is in Robert Jervis, *The Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1989).

1950 was a striking failure of security policy for the US and the ROK. A question raised as a result was whether it constituted a failure of deterrence or a failure to practice deterrence properly. In the US and much of the West, it was soon concluded that the attack represented both. It was asserted that the Soviet Union, in ordering (so everyone believed then) the attack by the North, must have seen Western deterrence in general as weak, as containing “soft” spots, presumably in part because the Soviet Union’s recent acquisition of nuclear weapons had devalued US deterrence. But it was also charged that the US had not properly and effectively practiced deterrence because it had not clearly established a commitment to South Korea and, in fact, had seemed to indicate that the ROK was not a vital American interest, not included in the US defense perimeter in East Asia.

One result was a strenuous effort to strengthen Western deterrence everywhere: tightening up the NATO alliance and sending US troops to Europe, pursuing Western European rearmament along with US efforts to rearm and send military aid to its allies, extending containment to China, and undertaking rapid expansion of the US nuclear arsenal including an intensive program to develop the hydrogen bomb. Another reaction was to make American deterrence commitments more explicit through formal alliances and informal, yet clearly indicated, ties to others such as Yugoslavia or Sweden. The ROK experienced the effects of both of those responses: installation of a formal, highly integrated alliance with the US that included significant US forces stationed in Korea or nearby, US nuclear weapons also located in the country or nearby, and years of US military assistance. North Korea secured alliances with China and the Soviet Union, military aid, and the rebuilding of its armed forces both for deterrence purposes and for a possible future attack on the South.

Yet another reaction to the Korean War was the emergence of the first explicit US nuclear deterrence strategy, massive retaliation, under which the US threatened to deal with a future East-West war, regional

or global, via the early use of tactical nuclear weapons and perhaps an early massive escalation to the strategic nuclear level. For a time, this was also the declared posture of NATO and, more or less, of the Soviet Union.

After the Korean War, neither side on the peninsula was satisfied with deterrence. Each readily concluded that it had to be constantly on high alert against a possible attack, the demilitarized zone became highly militarized, there were recurring military incidents, and the political conflict remained very tense and hostile. Each was not certain that deterrence would work given its view of what the other side wanted and was planning for, and since nuclear weapons might well be involved in a future war, any failure of deterrence could be deadly. Korea remained a highly dangerous place.

As well, neither side was happy with being deterred. North Korea maintained huge forces armed and trained, and eventually deployed, for fighting by immediately going on the offensive. It periodically launched small attacks and probes, sent commandos or assassination squads into the South, or sought other ways to destabilize the ROK. Clearly hoping to someday unify the peninsula, by force if need be, it objected vociferously to the ROK-US alliance (and the US-Japan alliance in the background) and the presence of US forces.

On the other hand, there were always Koreans and Americans who, in a similar fashion, chafed at being constrained by deterrence because it prevented putting an end once and for all to the North Korean regime, the military threat it posed, and its harassment. In the ensuing decades, the US and ROK clearly were unhappy about the ongoing possibility of another war, and thus the necessity and burdens of relying on deterrence - maintaining large forces on relatively high alert status, backed by nuclear weapons. The peninsula too often saw occurrences and developments that reinforced its reputation as one of the most likely places for the outbreak of a major war and one that could possibly trigger a full East-West conflict.

Eventually, North Korea began to drop behind the ROK economically, and therefore, lagged in the ability to maintain large modern forces. It also began to lose support for an attack on the South among its allies (and possibly their support even in a war it did not initiate). It became increasingly uneasy about its eventual ability to deter an attack on itself with just conventional forces. Facing a looming military deficit at the conventional level in a future war, the North launched a nuclear weapons program sometime in the 1980s. Since then, it has never completely abandoned its ambition to have nuclear weapons and a suitable delivery system. The official American view for years has been that the North has fabricated perhaps two nuclear weapons, but with no assessment as to whether these are operational weapons with suitable delivery systems. The South Korean and Chinese governments have been less certain on this estimation, suggesting that the North may well not have any nuclear weapons. Since 2002, the US has charged that the North has a nuclear enrichment program and that it may be reprocessing fuel rods from one reactor to make an additional few nuclear weapons. Again, others are not certain that this is the case, and North Korean pronouncements or offhanded comments are ambiguous.

The ROK-US response to the North's nuclear weapons program was to develop even more uneasiness about having to continue to rely on deterrence. One result over the years has been periodic efforts to achieve a detente with the North, to seek engagement leading to more normal relations.<sup>2</sup> Another has been repeated efforts to pressure the North into suspending or abandoning its nuclear weapons program, pressure that at one point was headed toward US attacks on the North's nuclear program installations.<sup>3</sup> With respect to each of these

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2 Details on this can be found in Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A contemporary History* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1997).

3 See Joel S. Wit, Daniel B. Poneman, and Robert L. Gallucci, *Going Critical: The First North Korean Nuclear Crisis* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004) for details.

policies, there has also been suspicion in various quarters that Pyongyang is fundamentally unsuitable as either an engagement partner or a target of deterrence. Often, this has taken the form of charges that its leadership is too unstable in its decision making for either cooperation or being deterred - that it is irrational, or too closed to the outside world to have a firm grip on reality, or driven to pursue goals that permit neither a meaningful relaxation of tensions nor a comfortable confidence that deterrence of the North will always work.

The North's nuclear weapons program and its development of other WMD has served to reinforce this uneasiness among the allies, raising additional concern about the utility of deterrence. That concern has had two, somewhat contradictory, aspects. First, there has been fear that *deterrence of the North would not work*; that nuclear weapons would embolden the North to take excessive risks of war by such steps as resisting the accommodations needed to reduce tensions and avoid crises. This concern was never extreme, and thus, has not been overly important, and this remains true today (as is discussed below). The probability of an attack by the North has been seen as declining over the years. While there are hypothetical scenarios under which the North could instigate another Korean War, including some in which it uses WMD in a preemptive fashion to win a lightning victory and confront the US with a fait accompli, they seem plausible only if the North becomes utterly desperate. Lacking reliable allies and a meager economic base, and armed largely with obsolete weapons, the North is in a very poor position to start a war, particularly one with no realistic prospect of success. Using its nuclear weapons (if it has any) not to preempt but to forestall any escalatory response would still leave the North highly vulnerable to complete defeat at the conventional level.

Second, there has been fear that *deterrence by North Korea will someday work* when the allies have been compelled to think about resorting to force. In recent years, this has been a very serious American concern about a number of the so-called "rogue" states. On numerous issues

the US and others want the North to curb its unacceptable behavior - stop selling missiles, stop developing nuclear weapons, etc., or adopt important policy changes - implement thorough economic and political reforms, demilitarize the demilitarized zone, improve human rights conditions. Over the years, they have tried negotiations, engagement, containment, sanctions, and deterrence, but always with very limited results. Their ultimate recourse would be to threaten, and after that fails, to turn to the use of force. The fear is that North Korean nuclear weapons would cancel the option of using force as a last resort, leaving the North free to continue its unacceptable behavior. Since evidence has been plentiful that the North may not concede to outsiders' wishes, or do so only at a price they are unwilling to pay, fear of being deterred by the North from forcing it to do what outsiders want it to do is a serious matter, particularly when nuclear proliferation in Korea is considered likely to spread proliferation elsewhere in the region and probably stimulate it in other regions. Since the North regards giving in to outside pressure not only as an affront to its independence and dignity but likely to undermine the regime and even the future of the country, having no military option would mean having to put up with the North's behavior indefinitely.

This fear that our deterrence won't work but the North's will is somewhat odd. How can the weakest state be expected to have the most success in practicing deterrence? One answer might be that the North always has greater stakes at risk in a confrontation because its survival is on the line, and therefore, its determination to not give in and to fight with any weapons it has is more credible than that of its opponents, so its deterrence would be more effective. But South Korea would likely also have its survival at risk in another war on the peninsula. As for the US, it has demonstrated in the past that it will fight to defend South Korea, and more recently (in Iraq), that it will fight to prevent nuclear proliferation by regimes it especially dislikes. It also has much at stake in preventing a nuclear arms race in Northeast Asia.

Finally, as will be apparent shortly, having one's survival at stake is not necessarily a great asset in a deterrence situation. Thus, it is not at all clear that, in a fundamental sense, the balance of resolve always favors the North.

Another answer is that often the US and its friends have been contemplating the use of *compelling force*, not deterrence, toward the North. Compelling force is the use of threats of harm to induce a state to stop doing what it is already doing, as opposed to deterrence where the threat of harm is to prevent it from doing something it has not yet done. It is generally agreed that compelling force and deterrence overlap a great deal, such that in crises the distinction between them is often artificial. However, it is also generally agreed that when the compelling component is uppermost, in principle it is more arduous than deterrence to carry out successfully because it seeks a more politically and psychologically repugnant response from the target government, one that seems more humiliating because the submission to coercion involved is more obvious. This would mean that the deterrence mounted by the North to offset a compelling threat would have more credibility.

The fears that deterrence of the North (and other rogue states) will not work and that deterrence by the North - particularly if it rests on nuclear weapons - will work have been widely expressed,<sup>4</sup> and their imprint can be seen in various national policies and many proposals from commentators and analysts for dealing with the North Korean situation. A careful assessment of these fears in light of what we know about deterrence may be useful.

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4 Fears of this with regard to "rogue states" are reviewed in Patrick Morgan, *Deterrence Now* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 269-276.



## On Deterring North Korea

In view of what various studies tell us about how deterrence works, deterring the North need not be of great concern. The US, ROK, and Japan would probably all have to be involved in some way in a military confrontation with North Korea, and they are clearly superior militarily, economically, demographically, and technologically. It has been a long time since North Korea fought a war and this is apparent. If the North is in such a deficient position on a possible war, deterring it from other very provocative actions may also be possible. Then, why is concern over deterring the North repeatedly voiced? The typical answer is that the leadership of the North may be irrational or not rational enough to take the deterrence threats seriously, or, as a closed society, too vulnerable to miscalculation in its periodic brinkmanship crises about how far its opponents will really go. This concern is reinforced when the North announces that several often discussed steps - interdicting its trade in weapons or proliferation items, sanctions, air attacks on some of its installations - would be treated as acts of war and when it threatens in response to turn Seoul into a "sea of fire" or do something similarly destructive.

Several things can be said. First, it is possible that the regime is, or can be, irrational and it has a lengthy history of serious miscalculations; these things cannot be completely ruled out. That is the main reason that nuclear deterrence is often said to pose an "existential threat." There is always a possibility it might be carried out. Second, contrary to standard views about deterrence, rationality of the target state's leadership is not required for deterrence to work. Deterrence *theory* was initially constructed by assuming rational decision-making on the part of the target, such that deterrence was depicted as using threats to manipulate the cost-benefit calculations of that state launching a possible attack. But deterrence in *practice* does not actually require rationality on the part of either party.

All that is required for retaliation is sufficient fear of the consequences of the threatened retaliation to not do what has been indicated. The underlying perceptions and judgments that constitute and are shaped by this fear and that lead to abandoning plans to attack may be irrational, rational, or some combination of the two. This is also true of perceptions and judgments that lead to disregarding deterrence threats - they may be rational or irrational. It need not take an elaborate calculation of relative costs and benefits to be very afraid of being hurt and earnestly attempt to avoid that. Moreover, there are many variants of what is called irrationality, and some can make a leader or a government easier to deter. In fact, it is usually impossible to determine how rational leaders and governments are, even in retrospect (historical analyses of cases regularly disagree on this), so there is no solid evidence that rationality plays a key role in cases of deterrence success or failure. Finally, particularly on nuclear deterrence, even explaining how deterrence works came to rely fairly heavily on the parties understanding that they may not be consistently rational, in that threats that are foolish to carry out may nevertheless work because governments cannot guarantee to be rational at all times. In short, there is no fixed relationship between rationality and deterrence success or failure.

Elaborate studies to determine what factors make for success in practicing deterrence include comparative analyses of a multitude of cases, in-depth analysis of particular historical examples, and logical investigations of hypothetical cases. The most potent factor for determining whether deterrence fails turns out to be the *will or determination of the target government to carry out the attack*. Deterrence is an attempt to dictate the strength of that will, and deterrence threats do have an effect, to some extent, on it, but its strength is often significantly independent of deterrence threats. The result is that it often plays a major role in determining how successful deterrence is and how the target state responds. That will can be strong because of rational calculations and strategies or irrational drives and desires.

Thus, for US and ROK deterrence in a crisis with the North, the key question must always be: how strong is North Korea's determination to attack? It seems clear that its determination to attack is not very high. We can certainly cite the North's military inferiority (one basis for the allies' deterrence) as a factor. But we can also cite the weakness of the North's economy, and the North's dependence on outsiders, of which most, if not all, would suspend their assistance, trade, and political support after an attack, and we can cite the North's lack of true allies. Most importantly, in any significant attack, the regime's continued survival would definitely be at grave risk. Thus, deterrence of a military attack by the North does not seem very likely to fail. The only plausible route to failure is if a truly desperate Pyongyang, in terms of its survival prospects, conjures up a fanciful scheme for attacking as a last resort.

Deterrence of lesser but still very serious provocations is another matter. Throughout its history the conflict between the US and its allies on one side and the North on the other has had periodic outbreaks of what I call "serial deterrence." It is the kind of conflict which, because of its intensity, leads periodically to actions by one side which are unacceptable to the other and which it had threatened retaliation to prevent, but where the retaliation is limited for various reasons. The retaliation inflicts *unacceptable* but not *unbearable* damage. Deterrence is practiced not just by threatening harm but by inflicting it - the message is roughly "don't do something like that again." Often the other side, then or later, responds in much the same way or sends the same message in connection with some other grievance that it holds. If escalation is contained but the hostility is unrelieved, such conflicts readily settle into episodic or continuous outbreaks of force or other forms of harm inflicted in pursuit of deterrence. Exchanges of pain or other harm become the way the parties regulate their relationship, one way they carry on negotiations about what is acceptable behavior or not, and one way to emphasize how angry they are at the other side's behavior

under the current status quo so as to provoke additional kinds of negotiations.<sup>5</sup> In and around Korea, these exchanges of painful actions have sometimes been very nasty, and the North Korean behavior of this sort (pursuing WMD, selling missiles, attacking naval vessels) consistently arouses anger and frustration.<sup>6</sup> However, these sorts of actions cannot readily be deterred because they have become an integral part of the relationship, a component of the communication and bargaining involved in it. Only transforming the relationship can completely end such behavior.

### **Deterrence by North Korea**

On this subject, we can start with the fact that since its inception, survival of the regime has been due to its overwhelming preoccupation. This thread runs through all of the available evidence. For decades the North frequently, almost desperately, sought to end or negate the existence of the South as a competitor for legitimacy and rule. Failing in that, it consistently resisted recognizing the ROK's existence as an independent government, referring to it as a puppet - behavior less likely if the regime had been supremely confident of survival. The design of the state and ruling party, like other Stalinist states, reflected a fixation on regime and leadership survival; that has been one source of its totalitarian nature. Heavy reliance on a huge, tightly controlled, military capability for internal repression and resistance to serious domestic reform or opening up to the outside world were more of the same.

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5 Examples include the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the India-Pakistan relationship. Often what are called "extended rivalries" involve serial deterrence.

6 As do many of the allies responses to the leaders in Pyongyang - big military exercises, crippling economic sanctions, restricting hard currency flows, etc. are deeply resented by the North Korean regime.

The regime and state have always been at serious risk. This was gravely so during the Korean war. The North was able to settle into a consolidation and rapid development phase, but became increasingly at risk once the Park government put the ROK on the road to economic, and eventually, military superiority. The risk has also always included a severe military threat from the United States, a threat that has grown with American exploitation of the revolution in military affairs.

The North has therefore taken chances and gambled - to destabilize the South through probes, provocative incursions, and assassination attempts on ROK leaders, to engage in terrorism of other sorts, to overspend deeply on its forces and seek nuclear weapons - any of which might have provoked war and its decisive defeat. It has had to rely heavily on deterrence based on: 1) insisting it would put up a huge fight against an invasion with its conventional forces, possibly through a preemptive attack at the outset of a war. Some years ago the central purpose of forward deployment of its ground forces shifted from preparations for a blitzkrieg style attack to being able to respond to an attack by doing as much damage as possible, on defense or by offensive reactions, to US forces in the South and the South itself. The North has sought to deter the South, and also to deter the US by holding its ally hostage, just like what the Soviet Union did with Western Europe before it acquired a nuclear delivery system that could attack the US directly; 2) threatening to seriously damage Seoul by artillery attack, which would have a very serious impact on the entire country well beyond the immediate casualties and destruction; and 3) threatening to use weapons of mass destruction. Long an implied threat, it is now made more explicitly at times.

The regime goes to great lengths to make its deterrence threats credible. It has always projected an image of tenacity and belligerence - highly bellicose rhetoric, taking risks in various incidents, using a highly rigid approach in negotiations particularly as a crisis builds, and giving foremost attention to the armed forces ("putting the mili-

tary first”). It has long had interest in securing nuclear weapons, displayed in costly and complex efforts to develop them at considerable risk. It is almost certainly pleased with some of the effects of its image of being irrational, such as keeping opponents unsettled and worried.

For all its efforts, however, North Korea does not have a particularly attractive deterrence posture. To begin with, the regime faces an enormous military threat with inferior forces, no reliable allies, and no sustainable fighting capability for an extended war. It is therefore virtually certain to lose a new war on the peninsula, and thus, the regime needs to avoid a war at all costs. Naturally, it is interested in having effective deterrence for this purpose. However, given its past and recent behavior, its deterrence posture is not particularly reliable and the chief determinants of its security are not under its control.

To be effective in deterrence it is not necessary to be able to win a prospective war. All that is necessary is to be able to do “unacceptable damage” to an attacker. North Korea might be able to do a lot of damage, particularly if it used WMD. However, what is an “unacceptable” level of damage depends on the will of the attacker to go through with an attack - how much it wants a war and wants to attack. Deterrence is not difficult, and is of little use, against opponents who have little desire to attack, which has typically been true of the ROK and the US vis-a-vis the North. If they ever decide to attack North Korea it would only be because its policies or actions have provoked enormous dissatisfaction on their part, because it has become excessively provocative. They have tolerated the regime for decades and know that, under the right circumstances, they can go on doing so for decades - time is on their side in terms of North Korea’s eventual fate. Only if the North seems prepared to do something quite intolerable, or has already done so, would it appear that waiting for the North to change has become unacceptable.

At that point, their opponents, who by then would have developed a very strong desire to attack, would confront North Korean deterrence

with an enervating dilemma. The attackers might have a variety of objectives, from punishment to regime elimination. A regime dedicated above all to its own survival would come face-to-face with the fact that use of its most dangerous weapons in a war would, for the attackers, almost certainly create a profound determination to continue with their attack, destroy the regime, and eliminate North Korea itself. This is something that the opponents could inflict even if they only employed conventional forces, much less turn to WMD for a response in kind. Use of WMD by North Korea would be virtual suicide.

States with nuclear weapons have often found it very difficult to use them even when they do not face such a terrible prospect as a result. They have even suffered attacks and sometimes defeats by conventional forces without responding with the use of their WMD, attacks by parties that have WMD, and sometimes by parties that do not. China and the Soviet Union fought a series of pitched battles in 1969 with no escalation. India and Pakistan have had long periods of border skirmishes and worse when each knew the other had nuclear weapons. In 1962, the US was fully prepared to invade Cuba and fight the Soviet forces there despite the nuclear weapons on the island and the Soviet Union's nuclear deterrence forces back home. Iraq's possession of missiles and WMD did not deter the initiation of the Gulf War. Israel's WMD did not deter Iraq from firing missiles at it during that war. Argentina attacked British territory and forces in the Falklands. Thus, a state with WMD is not therefore guaranteed to be safe from military attacks, and this is even more the case if such a state faces suicidal consequences if it used its WMD.

Ironically, it may well be easier to prevent a state that is much weaker than its opponents but possesses a few WMD from fully defending itself (with those WMD), than to keep one that does not have such weapons from mounting an all-out defense. Having nuclear weapons, for example, gives the opponents a very strong incentive to go for a preemptive attack, conventional or otherwise, particularly if it

brandishes its WMD for purposes of deterrence. Alternatively, it invites the opponents to be consistently poised to detect their opponent's preparation for possible use of WMD and respond in some massive way. In other words, it would be a hair-trigger situation with an increased possibility of escalation of the war as a result. The pressure to be cautious about the possibility of escalation weighs particularly heavily on the state in a conflict of who has the most to lose.

A state that is militarily inferior to its opponents should by all means want them to confine their attack to using a good deal less than all the military capabilities they have available, increasing its chances of evading a complete defeat by its defenses or of eventually bargaining successfully to prevent a total defeat. It wants the consequences of the war, however unacceptable, to be less than totally unbearable. If it has its survival readily at stake once the fighting goes too far and its opponents do not, use of its limited WMD would drive the situation in exactly the opposite direction from how it would want the war to go.

Thus, North Korea's deterrence threats to use WMD would lack inherent credibility, while the U.S. or other threats to attack North Korea in spite of the North's WMD capabilities and threats to use them would be much more plausible. Only the threat by the North to resist on the conventional level would be highly credible, since that would not compel the extinction of the regime by the opponents. Also credible would be the threat to damage Seoul as part of the resistance. However, a strongly motivated attacker who is greatly superior militarily may not threaten unacceptable damage and forestall the attack.

North Koreans can readily comprehend all of this. Suggesting that they are irrational enough so as to deliberately commit suicide by electing to retaliate in a way that would guarantee their elimination runs counter to their enormous commitment to survival for many years. Facing North Korea is, in this respect, much different from facing terrorists whose central mode of action is to commit suicide in the process. The only plausible route towards a deliberate choice by



Pyongyang to use WMD to respond to a US attack would be acceptance of extinction as inevitable, and inflicting destruction on the attacker to that extent is purely a matter of getting at least some revenge before the end comes. Thus, the proper way to move towards an attack would be to offer something substantial in advance in the form of reassurances and incentives to induce the sorts of concessions demanded, so that an attack is coupled with assurances that the end of the regime is not the necessary outcome. In keeping with this, it would be valuable to limit the attack at the outset in terms of targets and objectives.

North Korea could best avoid getting into this situation and having to face an impending attack not by relying on deterrence, but by taking steps to curb the intensity of the opponents' desire to launch the attack, particularly before the main preparations for it have significantly progressed or is complete. That calls for it to take steps leading to significant concessions so that viable alternatives to an attack are seen as realistic options by its opponents. This is not a North Korean forte, given its penchant for striking extreme rhetorical postures and rigid negotiating postures. However, some of this are simply classic Stalin-era negotiating practice typical of Molotov and other Soviet diplomats at the height of the Cold War, a pattern of diplomacy and statecraft from which the North has never really emerged. In that approach to international conflict, particularly when one is playing a weaker hand, clinging rigidly to one's position is the norm and concessions are made only when it becomes clear that there is no alternative to prevent collapse of the situation, particularly when it seems the opponent is about to give up in disgust and move towards more forceful measures. The North can, and will, be moved when pushed to that point to take some of the necessary steps.

The most dangerous situation for the North, however, would be to arrive at that point too late, when the opponent regards its last minute efforts as simply a ploy, and any agreements that the North might

enter into then would be totally untrustworthy. That is just how the Bush Administration hard-liners feel. In such a situation, if the hard-liners' view comes to the fore in shaping American policy, North Korea's deterrence would carry too heavy a load and be too unreliable. In turn, the most unfortunate outcome for the US would be to arrive at that point and, seeing the fundamental weakness in the North's deterrence and completely mistrusting its intentions, be so intent on attacking that it fails to seize the late-in-the-day concessions offered and move to obtain a workable settlement. In short, deterrence amidst a very severe conflict approaching or already within a crisis stage may not hold if no alternative to settling the conflict is offered or the opponent is so provoked that the alternative is not taken effectively. It is therefore not completely, and certainly not indefinitely, reliable. It is best accompanied by steps to ease the conflict and attain a modicum of agreement. The acquisition of a small nuclear deterrence capability *does not change this*, particularly when that capability is an exceedingly provocative step in itself.

## Conclusion

Gathering the elements of this perspective together with recent developments, the opportunity offered by the six party talks is very welcome, but nevertheless, worrisome. Time is a problem because of continued fears in the US that the North is simply using it to expand its nuclear capabilities. It is also a problem if the North's expanded nuclear capabilities were to be mistakenly taken as a guarantee that it is safe from attack. The 6-party negotiations constitute an opportunity that might not have arisen if there had been no Iraq War and its nasty aftermath. Without that conflict, building a sufficient consensus in Washington to take negotiation seriously would have been very difficult, and arriving at an agreement among all the participants that nego-

tiation is now the best way to deal with North Korea might have proven impossible. Negotiations are being used because in the wake of the Iraq War and in an election year the Bush administration cannot now gain domestic support for another war and it certainly lacks support in the region for that option, particularly in South Korea. But they are also being used because the use of force to prevent WMD proliferation in North Korea is being handled far better than it was with Iraq, and might well enjoy greater international support, if and when the US becomes so inclined.

Everyone in the region will benefit if North Korea's deterrence is never put to the test because the opportunity that the 6-party talks represents is effectively being exploited. The policy of engagement as the ultimate route to a thorough solution to the conflict will have to be pursued not just by the ROK, Japan and the US, but *by North Korea as well* to make the most of this opportunity. No one should conclude that the US will simply acquiesce indefinitely to more progress towards nuclear weapons by the North or no progress in rolling back the steps towards proliferation that have already occurred. No one should welcome an effort to bludgeon the North either. Thus, no one should be confident that deterrence will prolong unsettlement of the conflict for much longer or even indefinitely.