

U.S. ought to face North Korea facts Try bilateral talks; sanctions a mistake

By Dr. Han S. Park

If implemented, the "tough" sanctions adopted by the United Nations Security Council against North Korea could set off a full-scale military confrontation — with catastrophic consequences.

If, on the other hand, they are not forcefully implemented by China, South Korea and other member states, the U.N. sanctions will have little effect on Pyongyang's conduct. Either scenario is a major diplomatic setback for the Bush administration. What went wrong with the U.S. policy?

In essence, the Bush administration has largely based its actions on a number of basic misconceptions about the Kim Jong-il regime, coupled with a blind vilification of the man himself. At the same time, the administration has failed to recognize, or perhaps has ignored, some critical truths about North Korea that explain much about its recent aggressive conduct.

MYTH: Kim Jong-il is a madman. In reality, he is a calculating and shrewd politician who has survived incredible economic hardships and unprecedented diplomatic and political isolation in the world community. Amid these challenges, his regime was still able to develop nuclear weapons. Yes, there have been numerous human rights violations, repressive measures of governance and massive indoctrination of the masses. Yet he has achieved his goals as a political leader. Kim Jong-il is revered by most of his people. He no longer has to rule with an iron fist, and the people are in large measure voluntarily compliant and submissive to his leadership.

MYTH: The Kim Jong-il regime will collapse if economic conditions become bad enough. A political system does not collapse for economic reasons. It collapses when the system experiences an unmanageable degree of crisis over its legitimacy. The North Korean regime's legitimacy is not founded on economic performance but on ideological justification. Most North Koreans do not attribute their economic suffering to their own government. They cite external factors of losing traditional socialist allies and the hostile policy of the United States as the primary reasons for their misfortune. If economic difficulty were enough to force a collapse, Kim's system would have collapsed at least a decade ago when as many as 2 million of the 22 million citizens died of starvation. An economic embargo has never worked to drive a system to collapse, and more of the same will continue to be futile.

MYTH: A unified voice of multiple governments will be effective in forcing Pyongyang to give in. First, there is a sharp disagreement among the governments about the desirability of the collapse of Kim's government. China and South Korea vehemently oppose the collapse, while the United States and Japan eagerly welcome the demise of the "evil" system. This ideological chasm made the multilateral agreement on terms of the U.N. "sanctions" difficult, resulting in a watered-down version. Even with some

measure of agreement among U.N. parties, the larger problem is that Pyongyang is likely to be more defiant if it feels that it has been "ganged up on" by a group of nations, no matter who they are.

For effective negotiation with Pyongyang, one must begin with an accurate understanding of certain realities of the North Korean system. Pyongyang's behavior, in fact, reflects a set of salient system characteristics.

REALITY: North Korea is characterized by "pathological nationalism." Kim's leadership has been forged and maintained by nationalist ideology, not by its ability to satisfy people's needs. It is nationalism that legitimizes the system and helps the North claim superiority over the South. The fact that Pyongyang has stood up against the sole superpower on earth is an enormous source of national pride among the leadership and the people. Pyongyang will resist any pressure that undermines this pride.

REALITY: North Korean policy is determined by ultra-militarism. Under the banner of Military First Politics, Kim Jong-il established a system of government centered on the military that commands absolute authority. Kim himself is the head of the military and the entire state apparatus is subsumed under it. As such, it was the decision of the military, and not the civilians, to test the missiles and the bomb with the belief that nuclear armament is the only viable deterrent against any external aggression. The military believes that the Bush administration has not been able to invade North Korea because of the fear of retaliation, and that South Koreans, in particular, should be thankful to the North for deterring conflict on the peninsula.

REALITY: The North Korean political culture is undyingly paternalistic. The military and its supreme commander, Kim Jong-il, are considered the protector and provider for its people, who passively accept their proper position as dutiful "children." The state is viewed as an extension of the family, and the parents are unquestionably trusted. Even if the state makes mistakes, the people remain tolerant. The notion of republicanism or a contractual relationship between the government and the people is alien to North Korea. In this context, mass unrest that threatens the government is highly unlikely.

Given the above, it is clear that sanctions, resolutions and condemnations will continue to be ineffective. It is also clear that the U.S. effort to muster a unified voice against Pyongyang will continue to be futile.

It is time to conduct serious bilateral talks among Pyongyang and each of the parties involved. While the Bush administration may need a face-saving rationale for resuming bilateral negotiations with Pyongyang, it must not avoid direct talks any longer.

Unless the administration has the political resolve to engage in another unjustified war, it must negotiate with North Korea. Washington should not continue to attempt to outsource its foreign policy to China, especially when the stakes are as high as they are in this nuclear crisis.

Published by the Journal-Constitution, Thursday, October 19, 2006