

Dealing with North Korea from a Position of Strength--Preserving US Leadership in Asia¹

Abstract

This assessment acknowledges that North Korea's announced development of nuclear weapons highlights a continuing policy failure of the United States and concerned powers. However, an examination of the risks and likely negative consequences of alternative US policies shows the relative advantages of the US administration's current consultative approach with concerned powers in Asia in endeavoring over time to bring greater pressure to bear on North Korea and to contain North Korean provocative actions. The current US approach avoids abrupt or unilateral actions that could isolate the United States and reinforces US leadership in Asia, a critically important region for a wide range of US interests. It places the United States in a stronger position to deal with a wide range of challenges likely to come from the unpredictable but resilient North Korean regime in the years ahead.

North Korea's announcement last week that it has nuclear weapons underlines a continuing failure of US policies and the efforts of American allies and associates in Asia to halt North Korea's efforts to build nuclear weapons. This failure is well known by those following reports over the past two years of North Korea's secret nuclear weapons development and North Korea's public repudiation of previous agreements against nuclear weapons development. In a sense, the North Korean announcement is not news but confirmation of a grim reality that officials in the United States and a wide range of concerned governments have been dealing with for some time.

There is grave concern in the United States and among US allies and associates in Asia that the North Korean leadership will follow its announcement with more provocative actions including a nuclear weapons test or the transfer of nuclear weapons materials and technology to terrorists. Media reports earlier this year said that the Bush administration has strong evidence that North Korea engaged in the past in the clandestine transfer of nuclear material to Libya that could have assisted in the development of a nuclear weapon.

How to prevent the North Korean leadership from taking the provocative actions noted above is subject to debate among specialists and officials of concerned governments. The task might be easier if the outside world had a reasonably reliable understanding of the motives of the North Korean leadership, but it doesn't. Even those in the US government with access to special information have to be cautious in predicting what the North Korean leader may do. Kim Jong Il is at the top of this leadership and has shown an ability to switch policies and reverse course seemingly unconstrained by domestic and international interests and concerns that limit the options and decision making of more conventional world leaders. Thus, those who tell us with seemingly authority that they

¹ Testimony before the US Congress, House International Relations Committee, Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, February 17, 2005 by Robert Sutter, School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University.

know what Kim Jong Il “wants” and how US and international policies should change in order to meet those wants, are engaging at best in speculation, in my judgment.

Reexamining US Policy Options

US policy makers in the Bush administration and the Congress are considering changes in US policy following the North Korean announcement. Most of these changes appear to have serious negative consequences for US interests.

On one side are options advocated by some specialists that would see the United States go further in meeting North Korea’s demand for bilateral talks on the nuclear issue, US security guarantees, and greater US aid. The Bush administration seems prepared to offer security guarantees and greater aid, but on condition that North Korea truly ends its nuclear weapons programs. The US government resists bilateral talks with North Korea. It appears concerned that without other foreign powers being involved in the talks, North Korea would manipulate the bilateral talks and thereby pressure the United States to provide assurances and aid but with no guarantee of North Korea’s fully ending nuclear weapons development.

On the other side are specialists who argue for greater US pressure, with some seeking the use of military force against North Korea. The balance of military power along the Korean Demilitarized Zone gives North Korean forces the ability to kill hundreds of thousands of South Koreans along with thousands of Americans in an initial battle. This sobering reality and North Korea’s possible possession of nuclear weapons head the list of factors arguing against US military attack against North Korea.

US efforts in the Proliferation Security Initiative to work with other concerned powers to build mechanisms to deal with North Korean and other international proliferation activities have garnered wide international support, though China and South Korea remain reluctant to participate. Japan is ready to cut aid and apply greater pressure against North Korea, but South Korea seems committed to a policy of asymmetrical normalization with North Korea involving extensive economic aid and exchanges beneficial to North Korea. China tends to back the South Korean position. At present, strong US efforts to pressure and isolate North Korea likely would be resisted by South Korea and China, and possibly Russia, Australia and the European Union.

Careful US consultation with China and North Korea’s continued provocations over time have resulted in some change in China’s approach toward North Korea. Beijing currently shows less willingness to defend North Korean actions and more willingness to use pressure as well as positive incentives in order to keep North Korea from undermining China’s primary interest in preserving stability on the peninsula. Though China has opposed US suggestions to use the United Nations to exert greater pressure on North Korea and US suggestions to restrict aid to the North Korean regime, North Korea’s continuing nuclear weapons development and provocative posturing appear to be wearing down Chinese opposition to such pressure on the North Korean regime. If China were to change its stance in favor of greater pressure against North Korea, South Korea would be

more likely to follow, allowing for a more unified international front against North Korean provocations.

Preserving US leadership for the Long Haul

It is probably wise that US policy makers are resisting abrupt changes in policy in seeking a solution to the North Korean nuclear weapons development. The North Korean announcement does not fundamentally change the problems associated with the North Korean regime and its nuclear weapons development that are likely to be with us for some time. The North Korean regime has shown remarkable resiliency, belying predictions of regime collapse that were prevalent in the years after the death of Kim Il Sung in 1994. We can measure North Korean military power and economic performance to some degree, but our understanding of the political strengths and weaknesses of the North Korean regime is weak. Given the North Korean regime's resilience in the face of great adversity in the 1990s, it seems prudent to forecast its continuation for years to come.

As the United States seeks to deal with the problems associated with the North Korean regime, it needs not only US military strength and resolve, but the support of the concerned powers in Asia. The above review of US options shows that the United States cannot deal with the North Korean problems alone or in a position isolated from key Asian powers. If the United States hopes to contain North Korean proliferation activities and establish an international environment compelling greater moderation by the North Korean regime, it will need to exert positive leadership in Asia, eliciting the support and backing of the concerned Asian powers. Moreover, the United States will continue to have vital interests in the security, prosperity, and political orientations of Asia. How the US government deals with the North Korean issue will be an important determinant in whether the United States continues to play a leading role in this vibrant world area or is marginalized as other rising powers, notably China, move into positions of greater regional prominence.

Looking out, a number of authoritative commentators have expressed concern over a perceived decline in US leadership and influence in Asia on account of US preoccupations elsewhere, military assertiveness, and poor diplomacy, and a concurrent rise of Chinese influence.² They see US emphasis on geo-strategic issues, notably the war in Iraq and combating international terrorists, much less attractive to Asian governments and people than China's accommodating geo-economic emphasis. In fact, however, the actual decline of US influence relative to China or others seems relatively small amid continued evidence of US leadership in Asia.

Elite and public opinion in many Asian countries remains strongly critical of the US government, but Asian governments by and large have reacted pragmatically to US policies, seeking to keep relations with the United States on a good foundation. The United States is important for their economic development and the security environment

² See notably, *America's Role in Asia: American Views*, and *America's Role in Asia: Asian Views*. San Francisco: The Asia Foundation, 2004

in Asia. They remain wary of rising China and its possible ambitions, and see the United States as a needed counterweight. Even in South Korea, a country swept by anti-US sentiment and pro-China fever in recent years, government officials are clear eyed in assessing that continued good South Korean ties with the United States are essential in South Korea's ability to deal effectively with international powers, notably China.

One way to assess the perceived US decline relative to China is to compare the recent situation in Asia with past periods of US decline and rise of other powers. In the past few decades, there have been two notable periods of perceived or actual US decline in Asia. The first was the post Vietnam War period which saw a marked rise of Soviet military-backed expansion in Asia. The second was in the latter part of the 1980s when Japan seemed to dominate much of East Asia while the United States seemed unable to compete with Japan, even in the US domestic market. In both cases, the perceived US weaknesses turned out to be exaggerated as did the strengths of the newly rising powers. It is unclear if this third major episode of perceived US decline, along with China's rise, is subject to the same exaggeration and misinterpretation. What is clear to seasoned observers is that whatever decline has taken place in US power relative to China does not compare in scope or importance to the challenge to US power and influence in the 1970s and the late 1980s.

It seems logical to conclude that the impact of China's rising influence will add to recent challenges to the United States in Asia such as the North Korean nuclear crisis and disagreements over Iraq and the war on terrorism, to have the effect of weakening and diverting US leadership in the region. Nevertheless, such actual or potential challenges will remain balanced to a considerable degree by many continuing strengths and favorable trends in Asia for US policy and interests. US leaders have options to build on those strengths and favorable trends to insure US leadership in Asia relative to China or others for many years to come. The Bush administration's response to the Tsunami disaster in December 2004 underlined the kinds of options the US can follow to secure its influence in Asia. The Bush administration's response to the North Korean nuclear weapons problem poses another opportunity for constructive efforts sustaining US leadership in Asia.

US Strengths in Asia

At a time of US preoccupation with Iraq and other priorities, the Bush administration has adjusted in generally pragmatic ways to unexpected Asian challenges, notably in the Korean peninsula—an area of much more salient concern than Iraq to most Asian governments. While it justified US pre-emption and unilateral action in other parts of the world, the Bush administration in practice has sought to deal with the North Korean crisis and other issues in Asia through broad international consultation and engagement that is welcomed by concerned Asian powers.³ Of course, as is graphically illustrated by last week's North Korean announcement, North Korea's ongoing efforts to develop nuclear

³ Because of North Korea's military power, US military options against North Korea are more limited and difficult than those in the case of Iraq; US strategic deployments in Southwest Asia in 2003-2005 further limited US military options against North Korea.

weapons continue. A North Korean nuclear weapons test or transfer of a weapon to a terrorist organization could precipitate sharper divisions between the United States and Asian powers or within the US government.

Several key strengths in US-Asian relations sustain US regional leadership.⁴ Government leaders on both sides of the Pacific support the US security commitment and military presence in Asia. The global war on terrorism has strengthened US resolve to remain actively involved in regional security. The strong US military presence is generally welcomed by Asian government leaders. Chinese leaders have modified their past criticism of the US security role.⁵

Despite debate over the size and deployment of US forces in South Korea, the South Korean and US governments endeavor to manage the debate without jeopardizing strong mutual interests supported by a continued US military presence in South Korea.⁶ Meanwhile, polls that showed setbacks for the US image in certain countries in Asia also showed that most of those polled retained overall positive views of US leadership and that clear majorities in Asia agreed that their interests would suffer if the United States were no longer the world's dominant power.⁷

Under the Bush administration, the United States maintains open markets despite occasional aberrations such as moves in 2002 to protect US farmers and steel manufacturers, or US official complaints in 2004 about US job losses to Asia and unfair currency values by China and Japan. Asian governments view the US economy as more important to Asian economic well being, especially after the Asian economic crisis and Japan's persisting economic difficulties. Though China is a new engine of regional growth, US economic prospects remain much more important for Asian development. The United States in recent years has absorbed a very high percentage (about 40 percent, according to US government figures) of the exports from China, which is emerging as the export-manufacturing base for investors from a wide range of advanced Asian economies. The US market continues to absorb one third of the exports of Japan. The economies of South Korea, Taiwan, and ASEAN rely on the US market to receive around 20 percent of their exports. Much is written about growing Asian trade with China, and

⁴ Robert Sutter, "United States: Leadership maintained amid continuing challenges," in Ashley Tellis and Michael Wills (eds.) *Strategic Asia 2004-2005* Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2004, p. 37-66. *What the world thinks in 2002*, The Pew research center, December 2002, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=165>, p. T-45, T-50.

⁵ Michael Swaine, "Reverse Course? The Fragile Turnaround in US-China Relations," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Policy Brief 22*, February 2003, p.1-3. Bonnie Glaser, "China and US disagree, but with smiles," *Comparative Connections*, April 2003. Robert Sutter, "Grading Bush's China Policy," *PACNET* 10, March 8, 2002. <http://www.csis.org/pacfor>

⁶ Ralph Cossa, "Bush-Roh: Closing the gap," *PACNET* 20, May 20, 2003. <http://www.csis.org/pacfor>. Greg Jaffe, "Pentagon Prepares to scatter soldiers to remote corners," *Wall Street Journal*, May 27, 2003, p.1. Paul Wolfowitz, "Sustaining the US commitment in Asia," *PACNET* 22A, June 5, 2003; and Ralph Cossa, Force restructuring anxiety," *PACNET* 22, June 3, 2003, both available at <http://www.csis.org/pacfor>

⁷ *What the world thinks in 2002*, The Pew research center, December 2002, <http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=165>, p. T-45, T-50.

indeed China's share of inter regional trade is important and expanding.⁸ However, US trade continues to surpass China's trade with the region, especially in the key area of absorbing completed manufactured exports from Asia. Meanwhile, US direct foreign investment has grown notably in China; the level there is less than US investment in Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore, or Japan. China is only beginning to play a significant role in investing abroad.⁹

Despite strong rhetorical emphasis, Bush administration policy has been pragmatic in promoting human rights, democracy and political values in Asia. As the United States sought allies and supporters in the global war on terrorism and other endeavors, it has moderated its approach in these areas, an adjustment generally welcomed in Asia.¹⁰

After the September 11, 2001 attacks on America, the United States mobilized military, political, and economic power that proved overwhelming to adversaries and duly impressed Asian states. US power contradicted earlier predictions of US decline; the United States became more powerful and influential in Asia and the Pacific than at any time since the Vietnam War and perhaps earlier.

Amid criticism by some US non-government experts and grumblings in the ranks of the US military, US defense planners moved ahead with planned realignment and downsizing of US forces in Asia and elsewhere abroad, while sustaining large ground force commitments in Iraq.¹¹ On balance, the changes did not appear to change the prevailing situation where some in the Asian region might wish to challenge or confront the United States, and might be more inclined to do so if the US were seen as "bogged down" in Iraq; but most remained reluctant to do so given the dangers they would face in opposition to the world's dominant power, with a leadership seemingly prepared to use that power against its enemies.¹²

The major regional powers, including Japan and such rising powers as China and India, continued to be domestically preoccupied and are likely to remain so for some time to come.¹³ Focused on internal issues, they seek support from the United States and other powers, and do not seek difficulties in their foreign relations.

⁸ Robert Sutter, "Why China matters," Washington Quarterly Winter 2003-2004 p. 75-89.

⁹ Figures from US Department of Commerce, 2003, 2004. Chinese government figures show Chinese exports to the United States as much less than seen in US government figures.

¹⁰ The United States did not seek to bring China's human rights conditions before the UN Human Rights Commission in 2003. George Gedda, "US won't propose resolution on China," Associated Press April 11, 2003 (internet version). It offered a resolution in 2004.

¹¹ Greg Jaffe, "Pentagon prepares to scatter troops to remote corners," Wall Street Journal, May 27, 2003. See also discussion in US Strategy in the Asia-Pacific Region. Washington DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003.

¹² "The acceptability of American power," Economist June 29, 2002 (internet version). See also, G. John Ikenberry, *Strategic Reactions to American Preeminence*. US National Intelligence Council Conference Report, July 28, 2003 available at http://www.odci.gov/nic/confreports_stratreact.html.

¹³ See the chapters on China, Japan, India, and Russia in Richard Ellings et. al. (eds.) Strategic Asia 2003-2004 Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2003.

Japan, China, India, Russia, and other Asian states are actively maneuvering and hedging, seeking new and more multifaceted arrangements to secure their interests in the uncertain regional environment. They sometimes cooperate together. However, the leading Asian powers reflect deep divisions and competition in Asian and world affairs. Their mutual suspicions and competing interests indicate that any meaningful cooperation among them seriously detrimental to US interests remains unlikely. Moreover, this situation of hedging and rivalry also means that should one of these Asian powers emerge as a dominant power, as China appears to be doing, the others have the option of aligning more closely with the United States and one another in order to protect their interests. The recent behavior of Japan, Russia, and India in improving relations with the United States seems to support this conclusion.¹⁴

Another recent strength in US policy toward Asia has to do with managing US domestic pressures on US policy toward Asia. In general, US policy makers have done a better job in managing the often-strong US domestic pressures that in the post cold war period tended to drive US policy in extreme directions detrimental to a sound and balanced approach to Asia. President Bill Clinton's engagement policy toward China in his second term was more coherent than the policy in his first term that appeared driven by competing US domestic interests. President George W. Bush's policy is better suited to mainstream US opinion regarding China and has the added advantage of avoiding the need for significant US concessions toward China on sensitive issues like Taiwan that seriously exacerbate the US domestic debate about China policy.¹⁵

Meanwhile the Bush administration has improved US relations with all the great powers in Asia. This strengthens US leadership in the region, and reinforces the US government's ability to deal with crises and regional difficulties. The United States having good relations with Japan and China at the same time is very rare. The United States being the dominant power in South Asia and having good relations with both India and Pakistan is unprecedented, as is the current US maintenance of good relations with both Beijing and Taipei.

Conclusion

On balance, the Bush administration appears wise in pursuing a policy toward North Korea that preserves a leading role and influence for the United States in Asia that will be essential in US efforts to deal with the North Korean nuclear weapons problem in the years ahead. The policy also preserves broader US security, economic, and political interests in this very important world region.

The North Korean announcement of the past week should not prompt unilateral US actions that would be likely to seriously alienate Asian powers and isolate the United

¹⁴ Benjamin Self, "China and Japan: a façade of friendship," *Washington Quarterly* 26:1, p 77-88 (winter 2002-2003). Robert Sutter, *The United States and East Asia*. Lanham MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, p. 199-200, 222-223. Francine Frankel and Harry Harding. *The India-China relationship: what the United States needs to know*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

¹⁵ Hugo Restall, "Tough love for China," *The Wall Street Journal* October 21, 2002 (internet version)

States in the region. The steady and incremental US efforts to build international support to contain and pressure the North Korean regime to end nuclear weapons development seem more advisable under existing circumstances. In consultations with allies and associates who have been exposed to North Korean provocations and maneuvers in the Six Party Talks, the United States may eventually be able to come up with a way to conduct bilateral talks with North Korea with the supervision and support of other concerned powers, thereby avoiding North Korean manipulation of the talks to pressure the United States for concessions without North Korea truly ending nuclear weapons development.

Strengthening internationally popular US-backed efforts to curb North Korean export of weapons of mass destruction represents a key element in a US containment policy. Unilateral use of US military force is a last resort risking disastrous consequences for South Korea and overall US interests in Asia.