

Beyond the 'Axis of Evil'

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In response to the rapidly worsening crisis surrounding North Korea's nuclear weapons program, the George W. Bush administration has quietly reversed itself and agreed to restart direct talks with Pyongyang—and none too soon. Recently, North Korea has said it would unfreeze its plutonium facilities and withdraw from the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). The shift in the administration's strategy, along with South Korea's mediation offer, provides a stronger basis for a peaceful solution to end North Korea's defiant and dangerous bid to become the world's ninth nuclear-weapon state.

The Bush policy adjustment follows the failure of the administration's attempts to coerce Pyongyang to implement its denuclearization commitments and threatening punitive economic measures if it does not. Upon its arrival in office, the Bush administration abandoned its predecessor's policy of engagement, which had produced important, if limited, success in freezing Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missile activities. In early 2002, Bush also stoked North Korean security fears by naming it as one of three "axis of evil" states subject to the administration's policy of pre-emption.

Following the Bush administration's announcement that North Korea admitted it was pursuing prohibited uranium-enrichment capabilities in October, the White House organized a strong response, including cutting off heavy-fuel oil shipments. But the situation worsened as the United States stubbornly refused to talk with the North until it verifiably ended the uranium work. Not surprisingly, Pyongyang has reopened its more advanced plutonium-based nuclear weapons facilities and expelled international inspectors.

As of now, it is estimated that North Korea could—in less than six months—separate enough plutonium for six bombs. If North Korea builds nuclear weapons, a dangerous nuclear action-reaction cycle involving Japan, South Korea, and China would likely ensue. In addition, given Pyongyang's propensity to proliferate dangerous weapons technology, that nuclear material could very well be sold to terrorists or other states seeking nuclear weapons.

Caught between North Korea's brinkmanship and the absence of effective U.S. leadership, South Korean President-elect Roh Moo-hyun has launched an important initiative to restart direct talks with Pyongyang and to develop a formula for a new agreement to end the crisis. Seoul is reportedly suggesting that if Pyongyang ends its nuclear weapons work and readmits international inspectors, Washington should offer a formal pledge of nonaggression and resume heavy-fuel oil supplies.

The initiative, and growing bipartisan congressional pressure for talks with the North, might help the White House move beyond its failed "axis of evil" policy and give North Korea a face-saving opportunity to cease its reckless defiance of international nuclear nonproliferation norms.

In line with this approach, Washington, Tokyo, and Seoul issued a strong yet positive joint communiqué on January 7. It forcefully calls upon North Korea to eliminate its nuclear weapons program and fully comply with its nonproliferation commitments. It also endorses direct dialogue with the North. In contrast to the U.S. stance on Iraq's suspected weapons of mass destruction, the statement also says the United States "poses no threat and has no intention of invading North Korea."

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Although the White House is now willing to talk to North Korea, it has wisely stressed that it will not give way on the bottom line: the North must end its nuclear weapons work and comply with international nonproliferation norms. To compel North Korean compliance, however, Washington must also fulfill its earlier promises. As the South Korean formula suggests, Bush should formally reaffirm earlier U.S. security pledges and resume support for oil and economic assistance pledged under the 1994 Agreed Framework, which defused a similar nuclear showdown a decade ago.

Although the U.S. policy adjustment offers hope, many obstacles lie ahead. North Korea might continue to miscalculate and accelerate work to separate plutonium for weapons. Even as Washington focuses on the search for suspected weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, it cannot afford to wait to begin talks to halt North Korea's known and more advanced nuclear bomb program. At risk is East Asian security, U.S. credibility, and the future of global nuclear nonproliferation efforts.

Tough rhetoric and finger pointing will seldom produce nonproliferation results, especially if the United States itself wields the nuclear-weapons stick. With a little help from our allies, the administration may have finally hit upon a strategy that can end the current crisis, or at least avoid making it worse.

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