THE KOREA CRISIS

North Korea is not crazy, near collapse, nor about to start a war. But it is dangerous, not to mention dangerously misunderstood. Defusing the threat that North Korea poses to its neighbors and the world will require less bluster, more patience, and a willingness on the part of the United States to probe and understand the true sources of the North’s conduct.

“No. The only link between North Korea and Iran and Iraq, the other two members of the “axis of evil” identified by President George W. Bush in his 2002 State of the Union speech, is financial. North Korea has sold missile technology to Iran, with Iran and Iraq. North Korea’s concerns focus solely on the peninsula and do not extend to the Middle East. Although it does nasty things like sell drugs and make counterfeit money, North Korea has not engaged in terrorism in the last 16 years, and there has never been any link, nor any suggested, between North Korea and al Qaeda. Iran, Iraq, and North Korea do share some common traits, the main one being an adversarial relationship with the United States. They are also authoritarian, have allegedly supported or sponsored terrorism, and have programs to develop weapons of mass destruction. However, using those latter criteria, several other countries could fit in the axis. Why not U.S. allies Pakistan or Saudi Arabia, for example?"

Calm down. What sparked the current crisis over North Korea’s nuclear intentions were revelations last October that Pyongyang has pursued a secret program to produce highly enriched uranium that could be used to make nuclear bombs. That effort violated the Agreed Framework negotiated between North Korea and the Clinton administration in 1994, under which the North had agreed to freeze its nuclear program and accept international inspections in return for fuel oil shipments and, eventually, two “proliferation-resistant” nuclear reactors. The October revelations prompted a stiff U.S. response that included a cutoff of fuel oil deliveries. North Korea, meanwhile, has kicked out international inspectors, withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, and begun to restart its nuclear program—prompting fears that the country will soon have much more than the one or two bombs’ worth of nuclear material typically cited by U.S. intelligence analysts.

Wrong. Kim Jong Il is as rational and calculating as he is brutal. Dictators generally want to survive, and Kim is no exception. He has not launched a war, because he has good reason to think he would face fatal opposition from the United States and South Korea. In fact, like his father Kim Il Sung, Kim has clearly shown he is deteretable: North Korea has not started a war in five decades. Dictators do not survive without sophisticated political skills. Kim has maintained power despite intelligence assessments that his leadership would not survive the death of his father in July 1994. And he has endured despite famine, floods, economic collapse, nuclear crises, the loss of two major patrons in Russia and China, and U.S. pressure. There has been no palace or military coup, no extensive social unrest, no obvious chaos in the military, and no wholesale purge of various officials. Moreover, Kim’s decision to proceed with North Korea’s tentative and measured economic reforms is further proof that, however morally repugnant he may be, he is also quite capable of assessing costs and benefits.

But his rationality does not make him any less dangerous. Under Kim’s rule, North Korea has engaged in a coercive bargaining strategy designed to ratchet up a crisis with the United States. Provocations such as test-firing missiles, shadowing spy planes, and walking away from treaties can grab attention and even force the United States and its allies to provide inducements persuading North Korea back from the brink. A risky approach, perhaps—but rational, too. If you have little to negotiate with, it makes sense to leverage the status quo for maximum bargaining advantage.

“Kim Jong Il Is Crazy, Unpredictable, and Undeterrable”

“North Korea Poses a Direct Nuclear Threat to the United States”

By Victor D. Cha and David C. Kang

“A North Korea Belongs in the ‘Axis of Evil’”

Victor D. Cha is associate professor of government and D.S. Song-Korea foundation chair at Georgetown University’s Edmund Walsh School of Foreign Service. David C. Kang is associate professor of government and adjunct associate professor at the Taek School of Business at Dartmouth College. They are coauthors of Nuclear North Korea: A Debate On Engagement Strategies (New York: Columbia University Press, forthcoming).
can potentially carry a several hundred-pound payload between 6,000 and 8,000 miles—far enough to reach the West Coast of the United States. But without adequate testing, such a nuclear missile would be highly unreliable.

The fact is, North Korea could blow up terror-ist bombs in downtown Seoul every week if it had the desire to do so. It could smuggle a nuclear device into Japan, given the extensive network of Koreans in that country with ties to the North. For that matter, why should North Korea develop an expensive ballistic missile to shoot at the United States when smuggling a nuclear weapon in a shipping container would be so much easier? The primary value of the North's missiles is as a military deterrent, not as an offensive weapon.

The only nuclear threat to the United States from North Korea is indirect, in the potential transfer of such capabilities to third parties. Pyongyang has shown no aversion to selling weapons to anyone with the hard currency or barter to pay for them. North Korean nuclear weapons or fissile material hidden in tens of thousands of underground caves would likely go undetected even by the most intrusive inspections. But a transfer of nuclear material would be a risky proposition for a regime that values survival above all else. Given the preemptive mind-set of a post–September 11 world, any transfer of nuclear material would be a risky proposition for a regime that values survival above all else. Given the preemptive mind-set of a post–September 11 world, any transfer of nuclear material would be a risky proposition for a regime that values survival above all else.

Don't bet on it. Observers have predicted an imminent North Korean collapse since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The country's economic situation is desperate, but signs of politi-cal collapse are absent. The best indicator of regime stability is that social control, however vicious, remains solid. Although the flow of refugees from the North is increasing, there is no widespread internal migration, and few observ-able signs of protest.

Some evidence suggests that North Korea is serious about normal political and economic rela-tions with South Korea and the rest of the world. By December 2002, North Korea had cleared land mines from sections of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) separating North and South Korea. Tracks are being connected on the Kyonggiu Railway, which would run from South Korea through the western corridor of the DMZ into North Korea. Pyongyang has also begun work on a four-lane highway on the eastern corridor as well. In July 2002, the central government formally abandoned the centrally planned economy and allowed prices and wages to be set by the market. The government has also cre-at ed three special economic zones to exploit tourism and investment and amended its laws on foreign ownership, land leases, and taxes and tariffs.

Although some of these reforms have been halting and only marginally successful, they are also becoming increasingly hard to reverse.

Though the regime appears resilient, there are two sources of potential fissures. First, the decid-edly mixed results of several recent initiatives by Kim—among them, his decisions to lift price controls and to acknowledge North Korea's kidnap-ping of Japanese nationals in the 1970s—have exposed “Dear Leader” to potential disgrun-tlement in the top ranks. Second, the process of reform could create cracks in the regime's foun-dation. As Montrosque observed, revolutions don't occur when the people's conditions are at rock bottom but when reform creates a spiral of expectations that spurs people to action against the old stultifying system.
“The DMZ Is the Scariest Place in the World”

Yes, if looks could kill. When former U.S. President Bill Clinton called the border between the two Koreas the world’s scariest place, he was referring to the massive forward deployment of North Korean forces around the DMZ and the shaky foundations of the 50-year-old armistice—not peace treaty—that still keeps the peace between the two former combatants. Since the end of the Korean War in 1953, there have been more than 1,400 incidents across the DMZ, resulting in the deaths of 899 North Koreans, 394 South Koreans, and 90 U.S. soldiers. Tensions have been so high that in 1976 the United States mobilized bombers and an aircraft carrier battle group to trim one tree in the DMZ. The deployments and operational battle plans on both sides suggest that if a major outbreak of violence were to start, a rapid escalation of hostilities would likely ensue.

In practice, however, no such outbreak has occurred. North Korea has faced both a determined South Korean military, and more important, U.S. military deployments that at their height comprised 100,000 troops and nuclear-tipped Lance missiles and even today include 37,000 troops, nuclear-capable airbases, and naval facilities that guarantee U.S. involvement in any Korean conflict. The balance of power has held because any war would have disastrous consequences for both sides. Seoul and Pyongyang are less than 150 miles apart—closer than New York is to Washington, D.C. Seoul is 30 miles from the DMZ and easily within reach of North Korea’s artillery tubes. Former Commander of U.S. Forces Korea Gen. Gary Luck estimated that a war on the Korean peninsula would cost $1 trillion in economic damage and result in 1 million casualties, including 52,000 U.S. military casualties. As one war gamer described, the death toll on the North Korean side would be akin to a “holocaust,” and Kim Jong Il and his 1,000 closest generals would surely face death or imprisonment. As a result, both sides have moved cautiously and avoided major military mobilizations that could spiral out of control.

Ironically enough, as for the DMZ itself, although bristling with barbed wire and sown with land mines, it has also become a remarkable nature preserve stretching across the peninsula that is home to wild birds and a trove of other rare species.

“The Clinton Administration’s Policies Toward North Korea Failed”

No. The North’s breach of the Agreed Framework may make Clinton’s policies look ineffective, but consider the counterfactual proposition. If Clinton had not succeeded in freezing North Korea’s main nuclear facilities at Yongbyon for nine years, North Korea would today have enough plutonium for at least 30 nuclear weapons rather than one or two bombs’ worth.

Clinton’s engagement with North Korea also provided a useful test of North Korean intentions and expectations. Previously, the United States had little sense of the North’s interest in swapping its proliferation threat for external assistance. True, the debate between hawks and doves over this question still has a “he said, she said” quality to it: Hawks see North Korea’s violations of the Agreed Framework as evidence of the North’s lack of interest in such a deal; doves see those same violations as a reaction to the U.S. failure to fulfill the framework and still believe Pyongyang will give up nukes in return for outside support of economic reform. But now there is a baseline or “data” for a debate that previously took place at a theological and ideological level. Before Clinton, there was also no way to use leverage on a country with which the United States had next to no contact for five decades. Since 1994, the North has gained food, fuel, economic assistance, and diplomatic rela-
Think Again

“The United States Should Pull Its Troops Out of an Ungrateful South Korea”

No. Bush’s “axis of evil” speech and his professed loathing of Kim may have exacerbated the current crisis, but they certainly did not cause it.

First, North Korea started its covert uranium enrichment program for nuclear weapons long before Bush took office. As far back as 1997, Pakistani nuclear scientists were shuttling to Pyongyang, providing technology for uranium enrichment in return for North Korean missile systems.

Second, prior to the October 2002 revelations and despite Bush’s occasional negative statements on North Korea, the United States had offered a string of consistent assurances at lower levels that it would pursue some form of engagement. These assurances included the creation of a package of new incentives and the expressed willingness to meet “any time, any place, and without preconditions.” In addition, the Bush administration abandoned several initiatives cited as attempts to derail North Korean engagement—revision of the Agreed Framework and a push for conventional force reductions—after they proved to be nonstarters with U.S. allies. Compared with the Clinton administration’s effusive advances to North Korea, Bush’s aggressive posture was portrayed by some media as a dramatic shift, but the U.S. predisposition for engagement remained. The North Koreans’ response? They refused to engage in direct bilateral dialogue with the United States, accusing Washington of high-handedness.

Third, there is no denying the harder turn in both U.S. statements and policy after October 2002. North Korea’s perception of the preemptive language in the Bush administration’s new national security strategy and nuclear posture review could only have heightened North Koreans’ worst fears. But Bush’s unconditional refusal to talk with North Korea didn’t create the crisis. The administration believes North Korea stands so far outside the non-proliferation regime that negotiating its return would be tantamount to blackmail. Should Pyongyang first make compliance gestures, however, then the United States would be willing to discuss incentives including security assurances, energy, and economic assistance. Sounds like a negotiating position to us.

Not yet. Massive demonstrations, Molotov cocktails hurled into U.S. bases, and American soldiers stabbed on the streets of Seoul have stoked anger in Congress and on the op-ed pages of major newspapers about South Korea. As North Korea appears on the nuclear brink, Americans are puzzled by the groundswell of anti-Americanism. They cringe at a younger generation of Koreans who tell CBS television’s investigative program 60 Minutes that Bush is more threatening than Kim, and they worry about reports that South Korea’s new president, Roh Moo-hyun, was avowedly anti-American in his younger days. Most Koreans have complicated feelings about the United States. Some of them are anti-American, to be sure, but many are grateful. South Korea has historically been one of the strongest allies of the United States. Yet it would be naive to dismiss the concerns of South Koreans about U.S. policy and the continued presence of U.S. forces as merely emotional. Imagine, for example, how Washingtonians might feel about the concrete economic impact of thousands of foreign soldiers monopolizing prime real estate downtown in the

“The Bush Administration Caused the Current Crisis”

Ironically, Clinton’s carrots have become Bush’s sticks, enabling the latter to pursue a harder-line policy by threatening to withhold what was once previously promised.
nation’s capital, as U.S. forces do in Seoul. But hasty withdrawal of U.S. forces is hardly the answer to such trans-Pacific anxiety, particularly as the U.S.–South Korean alliance enters uncharted territory. The North Koreans would claim victory, and the United States would lose influence in one of the most dynamic economic regions in the world—an outcome it neither wants nor can afford. In the long term, such a withdrawal would also pave the way for Chinese regional dominance. Some South Koreans might welcome a larger role for China—a romantic and uninformed notion at best. Betting on China, after all, did not make South Korea the 12th largest economy and one of the most vibrant liberal democracies in the world. The alternatives to the alliance are not appealing to either South Koreans or Americans. Seoul would have to boost its relatively low level of defense spending (which, at roughly 3 percent of gross domestic product, is less than that of Israel and Saudi Arabia, for example). Washington would run the risk of jeopardizing its military presence across East Asia, as a U.S. withdrawal from the peninsula raised questions about the raison d’être for keeping its troops in Japan. A revision in the U.S. military presence in Korea is likely within the next five years, but withdrawal of that presence and abrogation of its alliance are not.


For links to relevant Web sites, access to the *FP* Archive, and a comprehensive index of related *Foreign Policy* articles, go to www.foreignpolicy.com.