

9. Dealing with North Korea: Unilateralism, Bilateralism, or Multilateralism?

THE UNITED STATES has been roundly and frequently criticized for favoring multilateralism in the intermittent six-party talks aimed at reversing North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons. The critics favor a bilateral (which in practical terms means unilateral) approach in which the United States would engage directly in negotiations with Kim Jong-Il's regime; the four other parties (China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia) would be more passive.

In the critics' more "nuanced" formulation, the six-party label is acceptable as a facade, but progress toward ending North Korea's nuclear programs requires the United States to negotiate unilaterally with North Korea.

Ironically, these same critics have repeatedly and fervently castigated the U.S. stance in Iraq as forbiddingly unilateralist and professed a strong preference for multilateralism.

What is going on here? More precisely, what is the case for multilateralism rather than unilateralism in dealing with the tangled and dire North Korean threat?

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This threat results from a North Korean stock of sufficient plutonium and highly enriched uranium to make (or to have already made) from six to eight nuclear weapons, together with a capability to deliver these weapons at distances of perhaps 5,500 miles. Still more worrisome is that North Korea might sell nuclear materials, technology, or disassembled weapons components to al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations with ample funds; Kim Jong-Il's regime is so badly strapped for cash that its survival may depend on rapid access to substantial outside funding.

The case for emphasizing a multilateral approach to the North Korean threat rests on the premise that reaching the desired outcome of a nonnuclear North Korea should be shared among the five countries—China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia, in addition to the United States—because their separate and vital national interests are collectively involved.

China's interests in a nonnuclear North Korea focus on preventing nuclear proliferation elsewhere in Asia, specifically, in Japan, South Korea, and conceivably even Taiwan, that might be triggered by a North Korean nuclear threat. Moreover, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which China organized before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, asserted a commitment by China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan to combat global terrorism. The SCO reflects China's concern lest North Korea be a channel through which nuclear materials and technology could leak to Uighur terrorists in China's own backyard of Sinkiang or elsewhere.

Japan's interests in a nonnuclear North Korea are no less vital than those of China or of the United States. Japan is keenly aware of the ingrained Korean resentment and hostility toward Japan. Were North Korea to acquire nuclear weapons conjoined with delivery capabilities that it has already demonstrated, Japanese policymakers might begin to doubt the adequacy of the U.S. pro-

tective nuclear umbrella. In these circumstances, responding to a likely clamor from the Japanese public, Japan might move toward acquiring its own nuclear deterrent, something that it already possesses ample technical and financial means to accomplish.

Although many in South Korea believe that a North Korean nuclear capability would not be directed against South Korea, the predominant view in the policy community is that a nuclear North Korea would profoundly disrupt Northeast Asia's security balance and thus imperil the region's stability on which South Korea's continued progress and economic growth depend.

Russia's stake in preventing a nuclear North Korea has been intensified by its plausible fear that nuclear devices might leak from North Korea to Chechnya's Islamist separatists, whose readiness to escalate their aggressive terrorism was shockingly demonstrated by their massacre of more than 300 children in Beslan on September 1, 2004. U.S. interests in preventing a nuclear North Korea are closely congruent with Russia's concern that a nuclear North Korea might become a channel for leakage of nuclear materials to global terrorism.

Although the individual national interests of the four other parties to the six-party talks—China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia—differ somewhat among the group, their individual and joint interests in reversing North Korean nuclear developments are at least equal to those of the United States.

Where a jointly favored, or "collective," benefit is sought by a group of countries, the crucial bottom line for their collaborative efforts is how the burden of securing this shared benefit should be shared. Multilateral management of the effort to halt North Korean nuclear development is essential. Whether and how much to use carrots and sticks, whether to apply force and penalties or combine them with the promise of beneficial transactions once all North Korea's nuclear programs have been terminated, requires collective, multilateral decisions.

For example, whether carrots in the form, say, of trade liberalization with and by North Korea or credit installments extended to North Korea and collateralized by claims on North Korean mineral resources, are options and decisions that must be arrived at multilaterally. Similarly, whether sticks in the form of inspection and monitoring of possible North Korean nuclear installations should be invoked, and whether the Proliferation Security Initiative should be strengthened and expanded to encompass surface and air surveillance and interdiction of suspected exports of nuclear materials and weapon system components, are other options and decisions that require collective judgment and choice.

In sum, securing a collective benefit—in this case, a nonnuclear North Korea—entails a collective burden and warrants multilateral leadership and multilateral enforcement.

POSTAUDIT

The arguments for and against multilateralism and unilateralism, respectively, as formulated in this article, remain intact two years after this was written. Indeed, North Korea's nuclear test on October 9, 2006, has reinforced the case for multilateralism.