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Assessing the North Korean Threat

On March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2003 four North Korean MIGs intercepted a US Jet flying 150 miles of the North Korean coast in the Sea of Japan. This interception is the latest in a series of actions undertaken by North Korea that cause increased tension between it and (especially) the United States. The North Korean administration has openly said that they want one-on-one unrestricted negotiations with the US, and appear to be working to make those happen on their own timetable. Recent provocations include, but are not limited to, announcement of nuclear program, announcement of missile capability and test launch, and this latest spy plane intercept. The current US administration has expressed interest in talks, strictly to discuss the terms of disarmament.

The United States needs to engage in unrestricted negotiations with North Korea. It is unreasonable for the United States to refuse negotiations for four main reasons:

- There is a limited window before critical mass of fissile material is created for a nuclear bomb
- There is a direct threat to the US from N. Korean intercontinental ballistic missiles
- There is a threat of transfer of fissile material or nuclear missiles to terrorists
- North Korean nuclear production will almost certainly lead to local proliferation.

North Korea does not produce any nuclear waste from reactors. After a similar nuclear effort in 1994 they agreed to abandon their current nuclear reactors. In exchange, they asked for light water nuclear reactor technology and a constant supply of heavy oil until these facilities were operational. After the 1994 US N. Korea talks (the Perry process), all nuclear waste was sealed into airtight drums and placed at the bottom of a pond. During the late Clinton administration, in 1998-99, intelligence noted that North Korea was building facilities to purify nuclear waste into weapons grade plutonium. In mid 2002, for unknown reasons, administration official Kelly was sent to N. Korea to disclose that the US knowledge of N. Korean purification efforts. To the surprise of everyone N. Korea acknowledged the program existed and the current crisis began. Shipments of heavy oil from the US were halted, as was all aid (this aid was very little).

The N. Korea purification technology is very advanced, and they have access to the nuclear waste that was put underwater in 1994. Analysts estimate that this 30kg of waste in the storage pond could, after purification, produce approximately 5-8 nuclear bombs. The purification facility could extract the nuclear payload in an estimated 2-5 months. The time window here is critical. There is a dramatic difference between negotiating with a country with nuclear capability, as opposed to one working towards fissile material.

If the appropriate fissile material were extracted from the waste there will be a threat to the United States directly. The previous version of N. Korean missiles, namely the No Dong did not have the capacity to hit the United States but could surely hit our troops in South Korea, but the newer missile, the Taepo Dong II, was shot into space in the late 1990's as a test and probably a demonstration of its intercontinental range (read able to hit the homeland). N. Korean missiles are very advanced, and have been exported to Yemen, Pakistan, and Iran.

Which brings a further threat, potential sale to terrorists. N. Korea is a poor country; it exports very few items. One of its ways of gaining income is to export ballistic missiles. If it were to have fissile material it is feasible that they could and would sell nuclear missiles purely for economic reasons, and could potentially sell them to terrorists. This is a huge risk, and after 9/11 the United States has realized this.

Finally, there is the risk of proliferation. Japan, in particular, has always relied on the American nuclear umbrella, being a comfortable distance from other nuclear countries. However the Japanese may feel the need to build their own nuclear program with a threat so close by (and maybe the Military Industrial Complex will stimulate growth).

Negotiation is the only viable option with regard to N. Korea. Bombing the sites is not an option for two reasons: It would destroy the alliance between S. Korea and the US, and it would lead to a backlash against American Troops on the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. S. Korea has a policy of "sunshine" towards N. Korea, and hopes for unification, and so would not react well the US bombing. In addition, regional allies like Japan would be at risk. It is unacceptable to allow the N. Korea to continue with its nuclear proliferation for

the reasons described here, and the United States should not fight with N. Korea and Iraq at the same time.

Negotiation worked (temporarily) for the Clinton Administration in 1994, when N. Korea tried to produce weapons grade Plutonium and hid the evidence. In exchange for heavy oil and light water reactors they agreed to terminate the weapons program. The N. Koreans cheated on this agreement years later. However, the Bush administration refuses to partake in the Clinton style negotiations. Members of his administration criticize the Clinton approach as conceding too much, letting the US be blackmailed. The Bush administration will not agree to negotiate, its only proposal for communication is a forum with the US, N. Korea, Russia, Japan, and S. Korea and discuss terms of disarmament only. They have a strict policy of not negotiating terms of national security.

I am not sure why Bush does not want to negotiate, perhaps he sees it as a sign of weakness, or he gains identity from it by differentiating himself from Clinton, or perhaps he is worried about his re-election. Whatever the reason, it is unacceptable to put the American people under such direct and indirect threat to preserve this no negotiation policy.