

The Dear Leader's Boiling Cauldron

By NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF

There's no country in the world remotely like North Korea.

Every home has a speaker on the wall to spout propaganda, everybody wears a button with a picture of the late "Great Leader," the government counterfeits U.S. dollars, parents must hand over triplets for the state to raise, and Dear Leader Kim Jong Il rules less as a Communist than as a traditional Korean god-king.

North Korea possesses 5,000 tons of nerve gas, and possibly smallpox, as well as plutonium for nuclear weapons. So the latest flurry of concern about North Korea is overdue -- but misdirected.

North Korea's test of a long-range missile that could reach the U.S. was dramatic. But it didn't violate international law or disrupt the fundamental balance. An incomparably greater challenge is North Korea's stealthy production of plutonium.

That is where President Bush's policy toward North Korea has failed dismally.

First, a bit of history: North Korea may have obtained enough plutonium for one nuclear weapon by halting a reactor in 1989. It didn't obtain any more weapon-usable plutonium while President Clinton held office (although it did try to start a program to enrich uranium, which is less of an immediate concern).

Then Mr. Bush's blustery refusal to negotiate led the Dear Leader to ramp up plutonium production, so today North Korea has enough plutonium for four to 13 nuclear weapons. David Albright of the Institute for Science and International Security estimates that by mid-2008 it will have enough plutonium for eight to 17 weapons.

So here's the scorecard: Weapon-usable plutonium produced under Mr. Clinton, none; weapon-usable plutonium produced under Mr. Bush, enough for at least several additional warheads. (As for the uranium, there's no indication that enough has been enriched for even one weapon.)

Even more alarming for the long run, North Korea has resumed construction of a large reactor at Yongbyon and possibly one at Taechon as well. Satellite pictures suggest that progress has been slow, but the new Yongbyon reactor alone could eventually produce enough plutonium for 10 weapons annually.

Finally, Mr. Bush's approach has bolstered the cowboys in North Korea while undermining moderates.

The Bush administration has been quietly critical of China for resisting sanctions on North Korea, but at least China and South Korea have a coherent strategy: soothe Kim Jong Il, encourage capitalist-style reforms, promote international exchanges and push North Korea down the path of moderation that China has blazed since the late 1970's.

President Clinton's approach to North Korea wasn't pretty but it did eventually stop both plutonium production and missile testing.

The real missiles to worry about, by the way, aren't the intercontinental ones, which are unreliable and probably not capable of carrying a nuclear warhead. The most threatening are medium-range Nodong missiles, which probably could deliver nuclear warheads to Japanese cities -- killing hundreds of thousands of people and severely harming the world economy.

Granted, the hardest job in the world is devising a North Korea policy; the easiest is to criticize one. Nonetheless, our present policy is failing so wretchedly that it's time to start afresh.

Escalating confrontation is a fool's game, because North Korea has more taste for brinkmanship than we do. It can hold a nuclear test, test a missile so that it "accidentally" lands near a Japanese port, send a few spy submarines to torpedo Asian stock markets, or trigger a financial panic by leaving a (sealed) suitcase of anthrax in the Tokyo subway.

The only option we have is to negotiate seriously, both in the six-party talks and directly with the North. Mr. Bush has steadily adopted more pragmatic policies toward North Korea over the last five years, and briefly last fall when he entrusted his able envoy, Chris Hill, with real authority, the talks went surprisingly well. Then North Korea had a tantrum and the administration reined in Mr. Hill, and we're back in a crisis.

Mr. Bush is absolutely right to raise North Korean counterfeiting and human rights abuses. But if we want to do more than huff and puff, those concerns must be part of an overall strategy to roll up our sleeves and engage North Korea, with our first priority a halt to plutonium production. It's time to hold our nose and negotiate directly.

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