

# **Goliath's Game: U.S. Policy toward North Korea in Strategic Context**

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## **Introduction**

US policies toward North Korea under the Bush Administration are frequently critiqued for being insufficiently responsive to the "real" circumstances currently prevailing on the Korean Peninsula and in the East Asian region. This article argues that this critique is insufficient. The ideological and almost personal predilections driving the Bush Administration's North Korea policy are not incidental shortcomings easily rectified. Rather, this orientation expresses the administration's deeper ideational foundations. The Bush Administration's North Korea policy is but one of many expressions of this foundation, the commitment to which impinges "realistic" US response to North Korea's growing nuclear ambitions.

This article first briefly reviews the current state of the Korean Peninsula nuclear crisis. The article next focuses on US responses to the threats this crisis poses to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and the wider array of global nonproliferation efforts that treaty spearheads. Because the inadequacy of the present US position stems from the Bush Administration's dogmatic adherence to a particular broader global outlook, the article then examines the ideational roots of the Bush Administration's broader concept of American grand strategy in the post-Cold War world. The article concludes that meeting the challenge to prevent emergence of a nuclear North Korea, and impede proliferation of nuclear and other weapons of mass violence more broadly, will require not simply realistic assessment of the problems, but supplanting the ideational dispositions of US policy-making that are impeding effective responses.

The confrontation between North Korea and the United States reflects metaphorically the Biblical parable of David and Goliath. David prevails because he has unshakable faith in the certainty that of victory despite his evident inferiority, and because, fearless in this faith, he finds and then exploits weaknesses Goliath didn't realize he had. Goliath's similarly unquestioned faith in his own strength blinded him to his vulnerabilities. The United States, facing an adversary correspondingly uninhibited by US potency, risks encountering an equivalent fate.

## North Korea Now

North Korea's nuclear aspirations have been problematic since it first joined the NPT in 1985. By the time the country accepted a safeguards agreement in 1992, it was already suspected of having extracted enough plutonium from its research reactor at Yongbyon to produce one or two nuclear weapons. Escalating confrontation over the inability of the IAEA to verify North Korea's non-nuclear status was resolved only by direct US intervention, culminating in the 1994 US-North Korea Agreed Framework, which froze North Korea's plutonium-based nuclear power program.<sup>1</sup>

From 1994 the Agreed Framework did successfully freeze North Korea's plutonium-based nuclear program, but it never succeeded in resolving discrepancies of past North Korean activities or in removing known spent fuel from the country as ultimately intended. These shortcomings loomed when, in October 2002, the Bush Administration confronted North Korea with charges that it was undertaking a second, uranium-based nuclear program. Escalating iterated reactions led eventually to North Korea ending cooperation with IAEA safeguards, commencing reprocessing of plutonium stored at the Yongbyon site, and withdrawing from the NPT, marking the collapse of the Agreed Framework.<sup>2</sup>

By early 2005, just months before the 2005 NPT Review Conference, North Korea for the first time stated explicitly that it possessed nuclear weapons.<sup>3</sup> In April 2005 North Korea shut down the research reactor at Yongbyon—which it restarted when the Agreed Framework collapsed at the end of 2002—suggesting that it is preparing to collect a new supply of spent fuel to reprocess into additional weapons-grade plutonium.<sup>4</sup> The fourth round of the “six-party talks,” convened in August 2005 after a year's suspension, ended in deadlock.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the United States and its regional allies continue actively considering new options, including potential UN Security Council action.<sup>6</sup>

Several implications of these developments deserve highlighting.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cirincione, Jon Wolfsthal, and Miriam Rajkumar, *Deadly Arsenals: Tracking Weapons of Mass Destruction* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2002), pp.244-49.

<sup>2</sup> For this author's own assessment of the breakdown of the Agreed Framework, see “Ostrich Engagement: The Bush Administration and the North Korea Nuclear Crisis,” *The Nonproliferation Review* 11:2 (Summer 2004).

<sup>3</sup> James Brooke, “North Korea Says It Has Nuclear Weapons and Rejects Talks,” *New York Times*, February 10, 2005.

<sup>4</sup> David E. Sanger, “Steps at Reactor in North Korea Worry the U.S.,” *New York Times*, April 18, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> As of this writing, the talks are set to resume in mid-September 2005. Whether this session will be more productive than previous rounds remains to be seen.

<sup>6</sup> Jim Yardley, “U.S. and North Korea Blame Each Other for Stalemate in Talks,” *New York Times*, August 8, 2005; Choe Sang-Hun, “Allies doubt future of North Korea talks,” *International Herald Tribune*, April 28, 2005 (<http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/04/27/news/korea.php>); “Japan willing to back Security Council debate on North Korea,” *The Yomiuri Shimbun*, April 28, 2005, (<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/newse/20050429wo41.htm>).

### ***Collapse of the Agreed Framework***

The collapse of the Agreed Framework in 2002 created a critical watershed. Many analysts, whether supporting greater confrontation or greater engagement, fail to recognize that the status quo has shifted fundamentally.

Until 2002, North Korea's nuclear ambitions were mainly contained. The worrisome spent fuel stockpiles, while still in the country, were under IAEA safeguards, and the research reactor was shut down. By most public accounts, the suspected uranium-based program was (and remains) not nearly as close to producing usable fissile material.

Since 2003 there have existed no direct restraints on North Korea's plutonium-based program. Moreover, by withdrawing from the Agreed Framework and the NPT without suffering meaningful sanction (in part due to lack of viable options), North Korea successfully stepped past several implicit "lines in the sand" which cannot now credibly be redrawn.

Today, North Korea is probably pushing its programs as hard as it can. While fabrication of a nuclear explosive device probably is well within North Korea's technical competence, the rates of expansion of its fissile material stocks and progress on other enabling technologies are more open questions.<sup>7</sup> The controversy over the statement by the head of the US Defense Intelligence Agency that North Korea had developed nuclear warheads small, light and rigorous enough to ride a ballistic missile to a target illustrates the dynamism and opacity of the situation.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond the simple technological limitations of time, competence and resources, North Korea now faces only one meaningful restraint in advancing its nuclear programs: China. Beijing holds several powerful coercive instruments, if it chooses to wield them. However, there are limits to North Korea's sensitivity to Chinese coercion, as Pyongyang's defiance of Beijing's entreaties during the most recent round of the "six party talks" has again demonstrated. There are limits as well China's willingness to utilize the tools it does have on behalf of the US priority to deny North Korea a nuclear explosive, when Beijing's own priority probably is to prevent the country itself from exploding.

### ***Policy Choices***

In light of the fundamentally shifted status quo, return to a 1990s-style engagement of North Korea is no longer enough. North Korea's strengthened position will make a "new deal" harder to reach. Moreover, 1990s-style engagement premised patience; now, because time is a key resource for North Korea's nuclear program, Pyongyang has every incentive to procrastinate. Even if Pyongyang wants an accord, the advances of its program will make verification of future compliance much more difficult – which makes reaching an accord harder as well. Achieving a non-nuclear Korean peninsula now requires rolling back an existing capacity, and many prior

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<sup>7</sup> Jon Brook Wolfsthal, "No Good Choices – The Implications of a Nuclear North Korea," Testimony to the U.S. House of Representatives International Relations Committee Subcommittees on Asia and the Pacific and on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, February 17, 2005 ([http://wwwc.house.gov/international\\_relations/109/wol021705.htm](http://wwwc.house.gov/international_relations/109/wol021705.htm)).

<sup>8</sup> Vice Adm. Lowell Jacoby, at the public session of the Senata Armed Services Committee, April 28, 2005. David S. Cloud and David E. Sanger, "U.S. Aide Sees Nuclear Arms Advance by North Korea," *New York Times*, April 29, 2005; Bradley Graham and Glenn Kessler, "N. Korean Nuclear Advance Is Cited," *Washington Post*, Friday, April 29, 2005. This first-ever US official statement that North Korea had progressed this far was greeted skeptically by specialists and subsequently retracted by administration officials. See Joseph Cirincione, "Don't Panic," May 3, 2005 (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/npp/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=16840>).

strategies to curtail North Korea's nuclear weapons development are not up to this qualitatively more difficult task.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, most policy analysis remains framed by the familiar question: is North Korea prepared to reach an agreement entailing surrender of its nuclear capability? Engagement advocates tend to answer "yes," asserting that North Korean belligerence is mainly maneuvering for bargaining position. Confrontation advocates usually answer "no," purporting that North Korean accommodation is merely a tactic to assuage neighbors and buy time.

But this is the wrong question. Its answer is essentially unknowable – given the opacity of the regime, both camps base their expectations of Pyongyang's responsiveness more on conjecture than evidence. It may actually be the case (as is true for any government facing a complex decision) that North Korea's leadership has not made up its mind. Indeed, Kim Jong Il himself may not now know exactly what agreement terms he would accept, and may not come to decide unless and until, like Reagan at Reykjavik, the choice is at hand.

Assumptions of any specificity concerning the nature of the ruling regime in Pyongyang are a poor basis for other countries' crucial policy decisions. Engagement (or confrontation for that matter) should be supported not on an expectation that North Korea's regime will respond in a predictable tit-for-tat manner. Instead, policy should be premised on shaping the international environmental conditions within which North Korea must promulgate its actions. As a weak country, these external conditions necessarily constrain its choices heavily; hence, shaping these constraints will also shape the range of possible outcomes regardless of Pyongyang's disposition of the day.

The international community should rigorously pursue rolling back North Korea's nuclear weapons capacities but also should take measures to prevent its development from fueling nuclear proliferation elsewhere. Both these goals point to building better cooperation among key interested parties and enhancing mechanisms of regional security cooperation and global nonproliferation compliance. The first step toward this end is to transcend the stale antinomy of "engagement" versus "confrontation" that now dominates policy debate. Most reasoned proposals for dealing with North Korea call for some combination of "carrots" and "sticks." But a synthetic approach must be more than "hawk engagement" intending to interact with North Korea just enough to give it a stake in maintaining cooperation ("carrots" today become "sticks" tomorrow) and to rally regional allies to support punishing the regime if (or rather when) it resists.<sup>10</sup> A fully comprehensive overture must both genuinely aim at achieving a broad negotiated solution and substantively bolster regional security cooperation to mitigate the impact if a negotiated solution is not forthcoming.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> No country has ever given up a publicly announced nuclear weapons capability. The only two cases of nuclear rollback – South Africa and the former Soviet republics – involved governments that had not embraced nuclear weapons in their security policies and also were triggered by dramatic regime change.

<sup>10</sup> The term is Victor Cha's, with which he describes the underlying logic of Bush administration policy. See Victor D. Cha, "Korea's Place in the Axis: Method or Madness," *Foreign Affairs* 81 (May/June 2002). In fact, Cha's argument for "hawk engagement" also has deeper analytical roots, aimed at forestalling any North Korean "rational" resort to aggressive military action. See Victor D. Cha, "Hawk Engagement and Preventive Defense on the Korean Peninsula," *International Security* 27 (Summer 2002), pp. 40-78. See also Kim Sung-han, "Coping with the North Korean Nuclear Problem: A South Korean Perspective," Presented to the Workshop "America in Question: Korean Democracy and the Challenge of Non-Proliferation on the Peninsula," Seoul, ROK, 10-11 May 2005.

<sup>11</sup> See Wade L. Huntley, "Ostrich Engagement: The Bush Administration and the North Korea Nuclear Crisis," *The Nonproliferation Review*, vol. 11, no. 2, Summer 2004; and James Goodby, "Enlarge the North Korean problem," *International Herald Tribune*, Tuesday, June 21, 2005.

The Bush Administration has instead exhibited rigidity and paralysis, basing its North Korea policy fundamentally on assumptions about the regime's character (confrontation would impede "bad behavior"). As those assumptions have proven specious its North Korea policy has floundered, as have attitudes toward these policies in South Korea.<sup>12</sup> But the inability of the administration to adapt to its policy failures, and to base policy more on evolving conditions than on fixed assumptions, results from the administration's powerful ideational predispositions that transcend the circumstances of this particular policy challenge. The Bush Administration's evident priorities concerning the impact of North Korea's nuclear ambitions on wider global nonproliferation efforts reveal the next layer of these predispositions.

## North Korea and the Nonproliferation Regime

North Korea's noncompliance with its NPT obligations has shown the limits of the NPT's existing verification and compliance mechanisms (technically and politically). But North Korea's proliferation activities also impinge the NPT treaty in several less direct ways; its nuclear ambitions threaten the wider regime of norms and expectations surrounding the treaty, which has become as important to global arms control and nonproliferation as the treaty itself.

Broadly, there are three areas of consequence of North Korea's nuclear weapons development for the nonproliferation regime to consider: its regional repercussions, its corrosive impact on the NPT itself, and its proliferation of nuclear materials and expertise. That the Bush Administration expresses serious concern only for the third of these three areas of consequence is indicative of how ideational predispositions are shaping the administration's outlook on proliferation challenges.

### *Regional Repercussions*

A steadily (if slowly) growing arsenal of nuclear weapons in North Korea will aggravate tensions and uncertainties in East Asia, in some cases potentially past breaking points. If North Korea's actions trigger a nuclear proliferation "domino effect" in East Asia, the viability of the nonproliferation regime would be shaken at its foundation.

The weightiest concern is that North Korea's ambitions would spur Japan to obtain nuclear weapons of its own. Japan sustains a peaceful nuclear power program that generates enriched plutonium, a space launch capacity sustaining advanced ballistic missile capabilities, and the technical expertise to reorient these activities into a sophisticated nuclear weapons development effort if it chose to do so.<sup>13</sup> Senior Japanese leaders (including those under current Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi) have occasionally opined on Japan's capacity to exercise this option.<sup>14</sup>

A North Korean nuclear test – an often mentioned prospect in early 2005 – would dramatically emphasize the specific threat to Japan many in Japan increasingly perceive North Korea to pose, and would likely fuel incipient Japanese opinion favoring an independent nuclear capability. This might in turn spur similar thinking in South Korea and Taiwan; although both their nuclear

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<sup>12</sup> See "Korea Backgrounder: How The South Views Its Brother From Another Planet," International Crisis Group Asia Report N°89, Seoul/Brussels, 14 December 2004, pp.21-23; presented by Peter Beck to the Workshop "America in Question: Korean Democracy and the Challenge of Non-Proliferation on the Peninsula," Seoul, ROK, 10-11 May 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Selig S. Harrison, ed., *Japan's Nuclear Future: The Plutonium Debate and East Asian Security* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1996); for an early analysis see John E. Endicott, *Japan's Nuclear Option: Political, Technical, and Strategic Factors* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1975)

<sup>14</sup> Howard W. French, "Nuclear Arms Taboo Is Challenged in Japan," *New York Times*, June 9, 2002; Erikson, Marc, "Japan could 'go nuclear' in months," *Asia Times Online*, January 14, 2003.

programs are less advanced than Japan's, both have demonstrated nuclear ambitions in the past, and both may be more directly motivated than Japan to respond to North Korean achievements.

In fact Japan may be less likely to soon pursue nuclear weapons than many assert. Japan's government has long recognized that obtaining nuclear weapons would not advance Japan's strategic interests either vis-à-vis North Korea or in the East Asia region more broadly.<sup>15</sup> US nuclear-girded security guarantees are fundamental to Japan's security posture, and US policy has usually adamantly opposed nuclear acquisition by any of its East Asian allies. Japan can more easily expand its East Asian presence as a non-nuclear state under the auspices of its US alliance than it would be able to as an independent nuclear-armed power.<sup>16</sup>

Hence, even a North Korean nuclear test might not topple the Japanese domino. On the other hand, a collapse in confidence in US security guarantees, especially if consequential to developments in Korea, might prove the crucial tipping point for going nuclear among key Japanese defense planners. The US reaction to the Korean nuclear crisis is the "intermediate domino" mediating Pyongyang's actions and Tokyo's prospective responses.

For this reason, the Bush Administration's signaling that it might view a nuclear Japan more benignly, even as it was cavalierly allowing the Agreed Framework to collapse, are crucial.<sup>17</sup> Such an attitude could have a pivotal influence on Japanese defense planners. More broadly, it also sends a powerful indication to all East Asian states about US intentions in the region: namely, that tipping nuclear balances of power in favor of allies and friends is a higher priority than resisting nuclear proliferation. This attitude stems from the administration's own ideational attitudes toward the role of nuclear weapons in the contemporary world overall.

### ***NPT Withdrawal***

North Korea is the first state ever to withdraw from the NPT. North Korea has also released itself from the 1992 agreement with South Korea to keep the Korean peninsula nuclear free, as well as the 1994 Agreed Framework. There currently exist no formal international legal constraints on North Korea's nuclear activities.

North Korea had the legal right to leave the treaty on ninety days notice.<sup>18</sup> While some NPT countries refuse to acknowledge North Korea's withdrawal, the UN Security Council has not acted on the 2003 IAEA referral (due largely to Chinese resistance), and the 2004 NPT Preparatory Conference and the 2005 NPT Review Conference "sidestepped" the issue –

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<sup>15</sup> In 1995 the Japanese Defense Agency compiled a 31-page secret report reaffirming previous government studies' conclusion that developing nuclear weapons would damage Japan's national and regional security interests. The existence of the report was disclosed by the *Asahi Shimbun* on 20 February 2003 (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/japan/nuke.htm>). See also Mataka Kamiya, "Nuclear Japan: Oxymoron or Coming Soon?" *Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 63-75.

<sup>16</sup> For a general discussion see T. Akaha, "Beyond Self-Defense: Japan's Elusive Security Role Under the New Guidelines for US-Japan Defense Cooperation." *Pacific Review* 11, no. 4 (1998): 461-83.

<sup>17</sup> The *Asahi Shimbun* on 17 March 2003 quoted Vice President Richard Cheney as stating that, in response to North Korea's development of nuclear weapons and missiles, "Japan may be forced to consider whether or not they want to readdress the nuclear issues." (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/world/japan/nuke.htm>). The comment came in the context of considerable US discussion spurred by Charles Krauthammer, "The Japan Card," *Washington Post*, January 3, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> The Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), Article X, Paragraph 1 (<http://disarmament2.un.org/wmd/npt/npttext.html>).

presiding officials diplomatically “placed in their pockets” the placard in front of North Korea’s empty chair – in order not to interfere with the “six-party talks” and other diplomatic processes.<sup>19</sup>

More complex is whether North Korea remains responsible now for NPT noncompliance prior to its withdrawal. The NPT itself contains no provisions for this issue. While North Korea’s withdrawal was within the legal stipulations of the NPT, its prior NPT noncompliance leaves its withdrawal far short of the “good faith” criterion that is a general principle of international law.<sup>20</sup> The UN Security Council could take up the question of North Korea’s NPT noncompliance as a “threat to the peace,”<sup>21</sup> but it could have done so just as easily before North Korea’s NPT withdrawal. The UN Secretary General’s recent high-level report on global security recommends that any state’s notification of NPT withdrawal prompt “immediate verification of its compliance” with the treaty; but recommends no sanctions beyond cessation of IAEA support.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately this issue is also a red herring; whether or not North Korea will be pressed on its NPT noncompliance through formal mechanisms such as the UN Security Council will be a political rather than a legal determination. Hence, the significance of North Korea’s NPT withdrawal is more political and symbolic. The greatest concern is that, if North Korea’s withdrawal is not reversed and the country suffers no serious consequences, the demonstration effect will set a precedent eroding current NPT compliance norms. At the same time, making allowances to gain North Korea’s re-accession to the NPT, especially absolving past noncompliance, would also set a precedent inducing other NPT parties to bend the rules. Hence, both potential courses – accepting compromises to elicit North Korean re-accession to the NPT, or accepting that North Korea’s NPT withdrawal may eventually render its past noncompliance moot – pose risks.

The Bush Administration rarely expresses worries over these kinds of potential impacts of North Korea’s NPT withdrawal on the viability of the treaty or the health of the nonproliferation regime more broadly. The silence is particularly striking insofar as the erosion of the regime is the medium through which Korean Peninsula developments affect the Iranian situation, with which the Bush Administration is now keenly concerned. North Korea’s NPT withdrawal is unlikely to *induce* Iran to act in kind, but Iranian leaders must be learning important lessons about what consequences Iran might (or might not) itself suffer by following the same path, and how the repercussions might be managed. Conversely, Iran would resist settling its own disputes on terms any less generous than those North Korea might receive for re-accession.

More broadly, however, the administration’s nonchalance over diminution of the NPT is hardly surprising. The administration’s lack of faith in both nonproliferation and international treaties is palpable.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the NPT’s Article VI, the only US international legal commitment to

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<sup>19</sup> See Peter Heinlein, “Annan Urges NPT Review Conference to Get Serious,” *Voice of America*, May 13, 2005 (<http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/news/un/un-050513-287d99b8.htm>); and “Walking the Nonproliferation Tightrope: An Interview with Ambassador Sérgio de Queiroz Duarte, President of the 2005 Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty Review Conference,” *Arms Control Today*, December 2004 ([http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004\\_12/Duarte\\_ACTversion.asp](http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2004_12/Duarte_ACTversion.asp)).

<sup>20</sup> Christer Ahlström, “Withdrawal from arms control treaties,” *SIPRI Yearbook 2004: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), chapter 19.

<sup>21</sup> Charter of the United Nations, Article VII (<http://www.un.org/aboutun/charter/index.html>); cf. George Bunn and John Rhinelander, “The Right to Withdraw from the NPT: Article X is Not Unconditional,” *Disarmament Diplomacy* Issue No. 79, April/May 2005 (<http://www.acronym.org.uk/dd/dd79/79gbjr.htm>).

<sup>22</sup> *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, Report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, United Nations, 2004, p.45. Even if it was not already too late for “immediate” application of this provision to North Korea, the sanction would have been irrelevant insofar as North Korea ejected the IAEA when it withdrew from the NPT.

<sup>23</sup> Its *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction* offers only a single paragraph on the role of “active nonproliferation diplomacy,” which simply reiterates the need for “a full range of operational



complete nuclear disarmament, contravenes the administration's ambitions to expand US nuclear capabilities and deterrence applications. This explains why it approached the 2005 NPT Review Conference actively seeking to roll back the disarmament commitments of the 2000 Conference.<sup>24</sup>

### **Proliferation**

North Korea's reinvigorated nuclear program gives it the potential to fuel proliferation fires worldwide by exporting fissile materials, nuclear weapons development technologies and expertise, or even completed operational weapons. This potential is highlighted by the recent questions as to whether uranium discovered in Libya might have originated in North Korea.<sup>25</sup>

This is also the consequence of a nuclear North Korea that the Bush administration takes most seriously. Whereas the administration seems now prepared to accept a nuclear North Korea as a *fait accompli*, with the consequential increase in pressure on the NPT, North Korean proliferation of nuclear materials or technologies to other states or non-state actors has apparently emerged as the administration's genuine "red line."<sup>26</sup>

In response to this specific concern, the Bush Administration launched the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a coalition of countries aiming to combat WMD proliferation through preventive interdiction of shipments of concern on land, sea, or air.<sup>27</sup> The PSI may impede but cannot prevent North Korea from smuggling small containers of fissile materials into the global black market if it is determined to do so. Because North Korea perceives the PSI as specifically coercive, it may also be obstructing a wider resolution; but this is an incidental consequence if materials proliferation is the administration's singular concern.

As an ad hoc "coalition of the willing," the PSI initially lacked international accountability and legitimacy. Its legitimacy has grown as it has gained more national adherents and the endorsement of the G-8 Global Partnership and the UN Secretary General.<sup>28</sup> However, the PSI (like similar initiatives) remains an ad hoc national grouping disassociated with multilateral nonproliferation treaty regimes.<sup>29</sup>

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capabilities" if the efforts fail. White House, *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, December 2002, <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/12/WMDStrategy.pdf>>, p .4.

<sup>24</sup> Carol Giacomo, "U.S. Rules Out Concessions to Shore Up Nuclear Pact," Reuters, April 28, 2005; Cf. Wade L. Huntley, "The NPT at a Crossroads," *Foreign Policy In Focus* (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC), July 01, 2005 (<http://www.fpiif.org/fpifxt/144>).

<sup>25</sup> Following initial reports, controversy emerged concerning how honestly US officials had informed allies that the material made its way to Libya through Pakistan, and whether North Korea was aware of its final destination – as well as the circumstantial nature of the evidence that the uranium originated in North Korea in the first place. See Dafna Linzer, "U.S. Misled Allies About Nuclear Export," *Washington Post*, March 20, 2005; David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, "Using Clues From Libya to Study a Nuclear Mystery," *New York Times*, March 31, 2005.

<sup>26</sup> "N.K. Nuke Test No Red Line, Former U.S. Negotiator Says," *Chosun Ilbo*, April 28, 2005; David E. Sanger, "Bush Shifts Focus to Nuclear Sales by North Korea," *New York Times*, May 5, 2003

<sup>27</sup> "Proliferation Security Initiative: Statement of Interdiction Principles," Fact Sheet, Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, Washington, DC, September 4, 2003 (<http://www.state.gov/t/np/rls/fs/23764.htm>).

<sup>28</sup> G8 Action Plan on Nonproliferation, Sea Island Summit 2004 (<http://www.g8usa.gov/home.htm>); *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, Report of the UN Secretary General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, United Nations, 2004, p.45.

<sup>29</sup> For a recent summary discussion of this linkage see Joseph Cirincione and Joshua Williams, "Putting PSI into Perspective," May 3, 2005, (<http://www.carnegieendowment.org/npp/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=16827>).



More direct linkages could enhance the accountability and effectiveness of those initiatives, whose responsiveness and flexibility in turn could help prioritize achievement over process in multilateral compliance mechanisms. This synergy would have two positive impacts. Practically, it would strengthen the world's available tools to keep proliferation problems from growing. Politically, it would enhance the nonproliferation regime's role as the locus for international nuclear nonproliferation cooperation. But this strengthening of multilateral nonproliferation mechanisms may be precisely the consequence inducing the Bush Administration to resist such linkage, pointing once again to the ideational predispositions coursing through the Bush Administration's approach to nuclear nonproliferation problems.

The Bush Administration's ambivalence toward global nonproliferation efforts stems from its more basic approach to the role of nuclear weapons in future US global strategy, evincing the deepest layer of the ideational predispositions constraining its responses to North Korea's nuclear ambitions.

## Goliath's Game

The Bush Administration's responses to the nonproliferation regime consequences of North Korea's nuclear weapons development stem from its skepticism toward global nonproliferation efforts, which itself stems from its ideational predispositions concerning the role of nuclear weapons in emerging US "grand strategy." The willingness to accept the regional implications of a nuclear North Korea rather than engage Pyongyang directly arises from its pessimism over cooperative security solutions generally, and its ambivalence over increased incentives for nuclear weapons acquisition by allies Japan, South Korea and Taiwan. The absence of concern over implications for the NPT further expresses the administration's pessimism over multilateral approaches to nonproliferation, as well as its distaste for the NPT specifically. While the Bush Administration is genuinely concerned over potential North Korean proliferation of fissile materials and technologies, its approach to the problem has again forsworn full-fledged multilateralism in favor of ad hoc "coalitions of the willing" such as the PSI.

These responses not just to North Korea's nuclear ambitions but also to nuclear proliferation challenges more generally stem from the Bush Administration's commitment to a strategic rationale based not on traditional "realism" but on an ideational conception premising US global leadership based on dominant military power. In particular, the Bush Administration's unwillingness to fulsomely engage North Korea diplomatically expresses a conviction that only regime change will ultimately solve the nuclear crisis, which is itself rooted in the administration's determination to use force, including preventive war, to exert its will against those undemocratic regimes it disfavors.<sup>30</sup>

To be sure, US military planning throughout the 1990s, as it absorbed the implications of the end of the Cold War, increasingly expressed a will to "dominance," meaning to be able to meet and counter all anticipatable threats to key US interests for the foreseeable future. But the Bush Administration's aspiration to "domination" abandons even a pretense that US military capabilities are there in response to tangible threats "realistically" perceived.

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<sup>30</sup> There is a crucial difference, wide in theory but hard to locate in practice, between concluding that the current North Korean regime is unlikely to forsake its nuclear weapons capabilities, on the one hand, and concluding that an active policy to force regime change is the most efficacious solution, on the other. The reason is straightforward: use of force to subvert undesirable regimes often has unanticipated and counterproductive consequences.

The 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) express the next layer of this grand strategy.<sup>31</sup> The QDR and NPR map out a fundamental qualitative conceptual shift from a “threat-based” to a “capabilities-based” approach to strategic planning. They portray this shift, which entails maintaining capabilities beyond those needed to counter known and foreseeable threats, as a response to the post-Cold War need to “extend America's asymmetric advantages well into the future” in order to prepare for the new prospect of “unexpected developments.” This methodology – preparing not to meet current threats but any potential threats that could conceivably emerge – pervades the Bush Administration’s strategic policy documents.

This conceptual shift to a “capabilities-based” approach is a tacit acknowledgement that no current threats exist sufficient to justify the strategic posture the administration now plans. But for Bush Administration policy-makers, this shift is not merely a means to justify dramatic US rearmament willy-nilly. Orienting strategic planning to counter as-yet nonexistent threats is also a device to divorce planning from the “realist” precept that the purpose of US military strength is to defend against threats. “Capabilities-based” planning enables the more proactive idealistically-driven international agendas that have become central to the administration’s world view and are articulated in a wide range of its global policies, including its approach to North Korea and global nuclear proliferation.

The Bush Administration’s National Security Strategy (NSS) articulates these ambitions, embracing unequalled US power and influence and determining to maintain this position indefinitely in order to promote governmental transitions favorable to US interests throughout the rest of the world. The language of the NSS, calling for the United States to “create a balance of power that favors human freedom” and “extend the peace by encouraging free and open societies on every continent,” re-invokes pre-Cold War notions of the American mission to deliver a safer world through virtuous exercise of American power.<sup>32</sup>

Such a vision is peculiarly appealing in the American political milieu because it harkens to a nineteenth century idealist internationalism underpinned by the security of broad oceans. This idealist tradition rejected the requisites of routine European style international diplomacy, such as sovereign tolerance and balance of power management, which it saw as cynical and corrupt. Instead, the idealists sought to escape such machinations, albeit in varying ways: one vein in favor of pure power (e.g. “speak softly and carry a big stick”), another in favor of visions of reconstituting international society on ethical terms (e.g. “the war to end all wars”).

The Cold War constrained both these idealistic veins by forcing the United States to confront vulnerability to a peer adversary which, due to the advent of nuclear weapons, had to be met at the negotiating table rather than the battlefield. Neither idealist community was ever entirely comfortable with the diplomatic tasks thus thrust upon US policy-makers. Less noticeably, the Cold War also obscured the often diametrical differences between these contending “idealisms.” The end of the Cold War liberated these suppressed idealistic ambitions from many of their constraints. The Bush administration strategic posture seeks to take advantage of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the United States as the world’s preeminent military power to restore a nineteenth century vision of American inviolability and international activism.

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<sup>31</sup> The QDR is available at <http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/qdr2001.pdf>. The NPR was first publicly summarized at a Department of Defense briefing on January 9, 2002. The classified review was subsequently obtained by *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*. (Substantial excerpts of the review are available at: <http://www.globalsecurity.org/wmd/library/policy/dod/npr.htm>)

<sup>32</sup> President Bush, “Preface,” *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, White House, September 2002. Cf. Frum, David and Richard Perle, *An End to Evil: How to Win the War on Terror* (Random House: December 2003).

This vision represents the ascendance of idealists over realists in shaping US grand strategy. But the active promotion of overseas democratization, by force if necessary, also represents the ascendance of a specific branch of that tradition. This is not an idealism focused on constituting a society among states, akin to Woodrow Wilson's vision to "make the world safe for democracy." It is a more natively American idealism challenging the prerogatives of state sovereignty and aiming to transform global organization fundamentally, more akin to the "big stick" idealism of Theodore Roosevelt. President Bush's recent repudiation of the Yalta agreements at the end of World War II evinces this viewpoint.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the Bush Administration's emergent grand strategy represents a triumph for *unilateralist militant idealism* over *liberal international idealism*.

Appreciating these particular roots helps clarify the Bush Administration's adamant opposition to engaging the Pyongyang regime as a sovereign interlocutor. Enduring North Korean antipathy to the United States drives but does not explain the administration's tenacious embrace of "regime change" as the only viable long-term solution. Unilateralist militant idealism draws on a deeper protection-oriented value system, symbolized by the sanctity of private property and parental control in the mythical ideal family.<sup>34</sup> All those outside the fence-line or the family are suspect and potentially hostile – you are either "with us" or "against us." This value system projects a vision for the US global role as the dutiful shepherd tending its flock, or the responsible father raising his progeny. Strays are corralled, and determined deviants are abandoned; miscreants are punished, and incorrigible villains are vanquished. The Bush Administration's persistent anti-diplomatic rhetoric emphasizing that the United States cannot allow North Korea to "be rewarded for bad behavior" powerfully evinces this attitude. One does not negotiate with sheep or children.

The ideational roots of the Bush Administration's unilateralist militant idealism also elucidate its approach to pursuing nonproliferation more generally. Its relative lack of concern for the regional and NPT consequences of North Korea's nuclear ambitions, and its unilateralist response to potential North Korean proliferation of fissile materials and technologies, evince a preoccupation with particular nuclear proliferators rather than proliferation as a systemic problem *per se*. Correspondingly, this stance also evinces an absence of faith in broadly collective responses to these concerns; thus, the single paragraph in the administration's *Strategy to Combat WMD* on the role of "active nonproliferation diplomacy" simply states the need for "a full range of operational capabilities" if the efforts fail.<sup>35</sup> Instead, these and other policy documents emphasize the need for proactive counterproliferation efforts, including possible preemptive attack, to eliminate adversaries' WMD capabilities before they are used – and even before they are explicitly threatened to be used. The possibility of preemptive use of nuclear weapons for these purposes drives the plans in the Nuclear Posture Review for development of certain types of nuclear weapons (such as earth-penetrating bombs) and the integration of nuclear and conventional forces in "adaptive" planning.<sup>36</sup>

From a more holistic point of view, threatening nuclear attack to achieve nuclear nonproliferation is tragically ironic; but in the value system underlying unilateralist militant idealism there is no contradiction. From this perspective, nuclear weapons themselves are not really the problem; the presence of nuclear weapons in the hands of bad states is the problem. In this view, increased US reliance on nuclear threats is actually part of the nonproliferation solution, while greater US

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<sup>33</sup> Speech by President George W. Bush, The Small Guild Hall, Riga, Latvia, May 7, 2005 (<http://estonia.usembassy.gov/freedom.php>).

<sup>34</sup> On the roots of US international idealism in currently contested domestic ideals, see George Lakoff, *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2004; ISBN 1-931498-71-7), pp.10-13

<sup>35</sup> *National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction*, White House, December 2002; *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, White House, February 2003, p.4

<sup>36</sup> See Wade L. Huntley, "Threats All The Way Down: U.S. Nuclear Initiatives in a Unipolar World," *Review of International Studies* (forthcoming, 2006)

commitment to nuclear disarmament is irrelevant. Thus, Assistant Secretary of State Stephen Rademaker, head of the US delegation to the 2005 NPT Review Conference, stated on the eve of the conference that the US disarmament record is “excellent” and that US plans to use the conference to focus attention on North Korea and Iran were fully appropriate: “This notion that the United States needs to make concessions in order to encourage other countries to do what is necessary in order to preserve the nuclear nonproliferation regime is at best a misguided way to think about the problems confronting us.”<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

The Bush Administration is right to base US security policy on a vision for a better world. And it is right to see a link between North Korea’s nuclear ambitions and North Korea’s regime. But it is wrong to think liberalization within states can be achieved through means that widen the divides between states. And it is wrong to think a peaceful nonproliferation solution on the Korean peninsula is possible without engaging not only North Korea, but also the complex tensions throughout the region and the systemic dynamics of global nuclear proliferation.

The Bush Administration often refers to the “democratic peace” in justifying its stark confrontations with autocratic regimes and ambitions for democratization globally. But its interpretation of the implications of the finding that democratic countries tend not to fight wars with each other is at best selective. Many in Asia, particularly in South Korea, have concluded that the United States is avid in promoting democratic development in other countries but loathe to accommodate democratically-driven divergence from US desires.<sup>38</sup> This is a necessary concomitant; the Kantian conception of a structure of peace through the spread of republican governments also premises genuine cooperation among these governments, rather than rote allegiance to the strongest of them.<sup>39</sup> This conception also appreciates that sturdy liberal government rises from a foundation of genuine self-determination necessarily in tension with the exercise of democratic mechanisms under the shadow of foreign military occupation.

Unilateral militant idealism is no protection from the asymmetric threats emanating from globalization’s seamy side. Its vision offers false promise instead of real preparation for the threats to the United States and the challenges to the global security system likely to emerge in coming decades, among which the old and new dangers of nuclear proliferation are at the forefront. Such misguided idealism risks distracting attention and resources from the practical efforts that might successfully cope with those prospects. Moreover, such evangelical bravado by the world’s most powerful state, backed by a military budget approaching that of all other nations combined, cannot help but be perceived ominously. In keeping with the basic imperatives of “realpolitik,” allies will grow reluctant in their support, adversaries will respond in kind, to the extent that they are able (perhaps by seeking asymmetric advantages), and new challengers will emerge.<sup>40</sup> A grand strategy rooted in a quixotic quest for unassailability and an evangelical zeal to remake the world in the American image is likely instead to exacerbate the security threats the United States already faces, eroding international and human security worldwide in the process.

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<sup>37</sup> Testimony to Congress, cited in Carol Giacomo, “U.S. Rules Out Concessions to Shore Up Nuclear Pact,” Reuters, April 28, 2005

<sup>38</sup> Workshop Report, “America in Question: Korean Democracy and the Challenge of Non-Proliferation on the Peninsula,” Seoul, ROK, 10-11 May 2005.

<sup>39</sup> For an expansion on this point, see Wade L. Huntley, “Kant's Third Image: Systemic Sources of the Liberal Peace,” *International Studies Quarterly* 40:1 (March 1996).

<sup>40</sup> For discussions of these issues see Walt, Stephen M., “Keeping the World ‘Off Balance’: Self Restraint and U.S. Foreign Policy,” in Ikenberry, G. John, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future Balance Of Power* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

To be effective and responsive to contemporary global conditions, US security policy ought instead to carefully reckon the complex power configurations that characterize the globalizing world, within which the US position is simultaneously preponderant and exposed.<sup>41</sup> Going further, US security policy could evince an alternative “grand strategy” more cognizant of the reality of existing global communal bonds and the direct US interest in the health and vitality of the planetary community of which it is such a large part. This strategy, which would draw on community-building ideals equally eminent in the American tradition, would articulate a vision of the US global role prioritizing the improvement of global governance mechanisms to address a wide range of interrelated global security challenges, including the several dimensions of nuclear proliferation.

Even modest reorientations in such new directions are unlikely while the Bush Administration remains in office. In the meantime, successfully confronting the challenges to the global nonproliferation regime, and specifically the North Korean nuclear crisis, will remain daunting tasks. Over the long-term, forging enduring solutions will require appreciating and engaging the current directions of US security policy not only on realist grounds, but on idealist grounds as well.

Goliath, so confident in his strength that he willingly bore the fate of his entire army on his own shoulders, each day pridefully challenged his adversaries, who cowered in intimidation – until one day the impertinent David felled the giant with a single stone, defeating the giant’s army as well. Bush Administration policy-makers on North Korea, and on many other issues, would do well taking to heart the lessons of this parable: overwhelming power obscures asymmetric vulnerabilities, and pride goeth before the fall.

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<sup>41</sup> For a recent prominent discussion of the US position in a world of complex power relations, see Nye, Joseph S., *The Paradox of American Power: Why the World’s Only Superpower Can’t Go It Alone* (Oxford University Press, 2002).