

Paying the Bully

What can the US hope to achieve in Northeast Asia?

President Bush's recent decision to deal with the problem of North Korea through the UN Security Council was a wise move but hardly sufficient, as consensus is likely to prove difficult. In order to understand this it may be useful to compare what recently happened with regard to Iraq.

Of the five permanent members of the Security Council none of them -- with perhaps the exception of the United States -- had a very large stake in Iraq. Despite the enormous rhetoric emanating from the White House, even the US stake was not particularly large, as it was Israel that had, and still has, the most to gain from a direct confrontation and eventual elimination of Saddam Hussein. In stark contrast both Russia and China share natural borders with North Korea, and the United States has several tens of thousands of troops stationed on South Korean territory -- this is to say nothing of those stationed in Japan. In addition, the Korean peninsula has been a bitter point of contention and Cold War confrontation among the United States, China, and Russia for the past half-century.

Ridding the world of Saddam Hussein, a strong advocate of pan-Arabism has far more appeal among the majority of the non-permanent members of the UNSC. KIM Jong Il's Korea on the other hand is situated in a part of the world dominated by the world's great military and economic superpowers, is neither Muslim nor Jewish, and does not sit on one of the world's largest oil reserves. Moreover, North Korea has until very recently been a diplomatic recluse and few people, if any, truly understand what goes on north of the peninsula's DMZ. Thus, with the exception of the United States and Northeast Asian national governments, who view North Korea as a dangerous but malleable neighbor, few people in the world are very concerned about the North Korean threat.

So, there we have it, the United States, China, and Russia among the permanent members, and South Korea among the non-permanent members. Japan does not sit on the council. Moreover, there will soon be a change of guard among some of the non-permanent members of the UNSC and the council's new president will be headed by a German, who may or may not side with the US with regard to North Korea. As a result anything good that might come out of New York is likely to be a rubber stamp of what the Big 3, South Korea, and Japan are able to achieve in Beijing, Moscow, Tokyo, Seoul, and Pyongyang. At most, the United Nations can serve as a conduit of information between the United States and North Korea until the two countries return to the negotiating table. But then, is negotiating between Washington and Pyongyang necessary, likely, or even desirable?

As the United States prepares for war with Iraq the North Korean government has seized a golden opportunity to escape the restrictions placed upon it by the 1994 Agreed Framework. Even if it were possible for the United States

to fight a war on two fronts without severe affects on both the US and world economies, there is no one in all of Northeast Asia who is very interested. China is North Korea's biggest trading partner and most important strategic ally. Russia and South Korea are on the verge of connecting across North Korean soil what is likely to become one of the world's most important rail links. Japan is far more willing to construct a missile defense shield than to support a US surgical attack, and both Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun are adamantly opposed to a military solution. Moreover, the US is not likely to lead an attack against the wishes of its two closest Northeast Asian allies.

As the United States government has long pressed Japan to join in the construction of a missile defense shield, Japan appears to have a long term solution that South Korea does not. Notwithstanding, the temptation of Japan to join hands with the United States in the construction of a theatre missile defense system would be an important affront to China; Beijing strongly opposes such a system. Moreover, recent warming in economic ties between Seoul and Beijing, as well as China's acceptance into the WTO, are strong incentives for Beijing to cooperate with Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington in applying pressure on North Korea to desist. Next to Japan, China is East Asia's second largest exporter of manufactured goods to the United States, and is thus dependent on good relations with Washington for its own continued economic success.

Of course, China's economic incentives do not end with entry into the WTO and ever improving trade ties with South Korea. South Korea is now China's fifth largest foreign investor just after the US, Japan, Taiwan, and Singapore. Moreover, Japan and China are important trade partners, and an economic boycott of North Korea would aggravate the already very poorly handled refugee situation in Northeast China. The North Korean economy may have improved over last few years, but it has hardly improved enough to provide an important disincentive for further flight on the part of North Korean citizens into Northeastern China.

Is it in anyone's interest that Pyongyang be permitted to continue its strategic nuclear development?

Since the peaceful and eventual unification of the two Koreas is South Korea's primary goal, there is some incentive for the South Korean government to accommodate North Korea's development of a nuclear arsenal; South Korea would be the natural heir to its fruition. Notwithstanding, South Korea is under strong pressure from both the United States and Japan to keep the Korean peninsula free of nuclear weapons. Furthermore, South Korean or Chinese tolerance of North Korean nuclear weapons development would be viewed as a serious threat to Japan's national security. Japan's recent decision to accelerate negotiation of a possible free trade agreement with South Korea should be a clear signal to South Korea that further North Korean nuclear weapons development is undesired. It has even been reported that Japan's Prime Minister will be attending Roh Moo Hyun's inauguration ceremony. Though Russia may feel little threatened by North Korean nuclear power, its own geopolitical bargaining position would be weakened if another nuclear player were introduced into the region.

As neither a surgical military attack, nor an economic boycott are very realistic, we must take Washington at its word when it says that the current problem must be resolved diplomatically. Colin Powell recently stated that the ball is in North Korea's court, what he did not say is what North Korea

is likely to do with it. The United States may be able to resist blackmail by refusing to enter into dialogue with North Korea until it dismantles, but in the end the United States poses little threat for North Korea. In short, if it plays its cards right, North Korea ought to be able to extract important concessions from its nearest neighbors.

North Korea is a bully, and you either pay it tribute or you stand up to it. At this point no one can ignore it, because with a nuclear arsenal its ability to play the role of a regional extortionist can only improve. Well, let's wait and see. Who knows, maybe North Korea will have done something good for Northeast Asia despite itself -- consolidate cooperation among its neighbors, and thus provide the United States with a good reason to go home. But what might then become of Taiwan?

Although the United States may be the offended party in this showdown, it can hardly be a very active player to the negotiation, only its outcome. It has only to refuse negotiation with North Korea until it disarms, and let its allies do the rest.

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