

**UPDATE**

## CLINTON'S RETREAT ON NORTH KOREA INVITES AGGRESSION

(Updating Asian Studies Center *Backgrounder* No. 127, "While in Tokyo and Seoul, Clinton Must Assert American Leadership in Asia," June 30, 1993, and *Backgrounder Update* No. 203, "America's Vital Stake in Korea's Democratic Progress," October 12, 1993.)

In its first significant foreign policy decision of 1994, the Clinton Administration capitulated to North Korea, an unrepentant communist state of about 22 million impoverished and oppressed souls who inhabit an area that is less than one-half the size of Nevada. The issue which made the U.S. blink: North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung's long-standing effort to build nuclear weapons. The blink itself occurred when Clinton Administration officials changed their previous position, and accepted North Korea's offer of a one-time international inspection of only seven out of nine identified atomic sites. This reversal accomplished four things. It:

- 1) **Placed two North Korean nuclear sites—at which important, potentially incriminating nuclear waste is stored—beyond the reach of international inspectors;**
- 2) **Abandoned the Administration's reasonable expectation that North Korea abide by the terms of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which Pyongyang has promised to honor, requiring regular inspection of nuclear sites;**
- 3) **Indicated that Bill Clinton's statement in early November that "North Korea cannot be allowed to develop a nuclear bomb" deserves to be regarded with increasing skepticism;**
- 4) **Postponed a diplomatic confrontation at the United Nations Security Council that would raise the issue of economic sanctions against North Korea. In short, the Clinton Administration sought to buy time by backing off from its original position.**

Unfortunately, time is something that the U.S. cannot afford. Both the previous Director of Central Intelligence, Robert Gates, and his successor, R. James Woolsey, have warned publicly that North Korea is very close to possessing a nuclear bomb. Departing Secretary of Defense Les Aspin said last December 12 that the North already may have built a nuclear device with enough explosive force to destroy a large urban center.

Bill Clinton's failure of nerve suggests that he does not understand the clearest and most painful lesson of 20th century international relations: tyrants and weapons are a lethal mixture. Hitler, Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot, and Saddam Hussein are some of the better known proofs. Everything about his record shows that Kim Il-Sung's criminal ambitions are fully equal to theirs.

On June 25, 1950 Kim launched the invasion of South Korea which resulted in the deaths of 3 million of his countrymen as well as more than 33,000 American troops. Failing to bring the Republic of Korea under communist domination by conventional warfare, Kim has adopted terrorism. In October 1983, North Korean agents detonated a bomb in Rangoon killing sixteen South Korean officials during a state visit to Burma. Four years later North Korea blew up a Korean Airlines flight killing all 115 passengers and crew. Among other notable unprovoked acts of terror since the end of the Korean War, North Koreans have hacked American military personnel to death at the Demilitarized Zone dividing the North from the South, attacked the president of South Korea's official residence, and kidnapped South Koreans abroad.

Kim Il-Sung is a despot who has grown accustomed to using violence of every description. He is as untroubled about sacrificing the lives of his own subjects as he is about murdering Koreans who live south of the 17th parallel that divides the Peninsula. And he is building nuclear weapons.

**What Should the U.S. Do?** The U.S. is bound to defend South Korea by the 1954 Mutual Cooperation and Security Treaty. Thirty-seven thousand American troops of the 2nd Infantry Division and the Air Force's 8th Tactical Fighter and 51st Air Wings support this commitment with their presence on South Korean soil. In his speech to the Republic of Korea's National Assembly last July 10, Bill Clinton reaffirmed America's solemn promise to honor the pledge it made in 1954. In the July speech, Clinton also noted that, "vulnerability invites aggression, peace depends on deterrence."

Clinton needs to remember his own words. And he needs to back them up with action. Yielding to the apparent implacability of an armed tyrant demonstrates vulnerability. It can only lead to more North Korean evasions, more excuses, more delaying tactics, and in the end, aggression—perhaps nuclear aggression.

Instead of retreating and giving Kim Il-Sung the time he needs to achieve his nuclear ambitions, Clinton should take positive, resolute actions that will demonstrate American firmness of purpose in requiring North Korea to honor the NPT. He should:

- ✓ **Increase pressure on Tokyo to curtail the flow of money from people of Korean ancestry living in Japan to their relatives and friends in North Korea.** This is estimated to amount to at least \$600 million per year, a huge transfusion of hard cash to North Korea's failing economy.
- ✓ **Demonstrate that American generosity to former enemies is neither permanent nor obtainable by blackmail.** Such experts as Selig Harrison of the Carnegie Endowment for Peace argue that North Korea is merely using the nuclear threat to gain American economic assistance. Lifting the trade embargo on Hanoi, a former enemy, would clear the way for an infusion of American capital to Vietnam, and remind Pyongyang that—as with Germany, Japan, and now Russia—Americans are magnanimous to onetime foes.
- ✓ **Promise more favorable trading terms on the export of Chinese textiles to the U.S. as a means to enlist Beijing's help in applying economic pressure to Pyongyang.**
- ✓ **Remind China's rulers that, although they may not feel directly threatened by Korean possession of nuclear weapons, their plans for economic development will suffer if Tokyo acquires nuclear weapons in response to Pyongyang.** The ensuing regional arms race would endanger China and the entire region's growth.
- ✓ **Modestly increase the American naval presence in the Western Pacific, and hold a military exercise to remind Kim Il-Sung how quickly the U.S. can move a large quantity of military hardware over a long distance, for example, from the West Coast to Hawaii.** The language of tyrants is force. If Clinton wants Kim to understand him, he must show that he too can speak this language.

- ✓ **Tell the American people that the stakes in this unfolding drama are very high.** Clinton should explain that it would be dangerous if North Korea sold nuclear weapons abroad—for example, in the Middle East; that the U.S. should not allow itself to be blackmailed by a minor power; that America still needs allies and could not count on any if it fails to stand by a nation to whom the U.S. is bound by treaty and the lives of 33,000 combat casualties. It is especially important for Clinton to explain what is at stake in Korea: almost no one on either side of the political aisle objected when the Administration took its most recent step toward appeasement.
- ✓ **Make no more concessions at the negotiating table, and inform North Korea that if it does not allow full international inspections of all its nuclear sites on a regular basis by February 1, the U.S. will ask the U.N. Security Council for international economic sanctions on the following day.**

**High Cost of Appeasement.** Resisting tyranny is a long and honorable American tradition. When he became President, Thomas Jefferson—whom Bill Clinton admires—was faced by an English monarch who did not respect American neutrality in the dispute between Britain and France. Upon provocation by Royal Navy ships, Jefferson decided that the failure to respond would only worsen matters. He proclaimed that acting as a neutral “under such circumstances ceases to be a duty; and a continuance of it, with such uncontrolled abuses, would tend only, to bring on a rupture between the two Nations....”

Weakness invites aggression. The price of continued North Korean aggressiveness would be high. Pyongyang could use nuclear weapons to threaten its neighbors, undermine America’s alliances with South Korea and Japan, and gain the foreign currency it badly needs to survive by selling nuclear weaponry to such dangerous Middle Eastern regimes as Iran, Iraq, or Syria.

Emboldened further by America’s failure to lead, Kim Il-Sung could be tempted to use military force once again to bring the South under his control. This would cost American and South Korean lives, stop in its tracks the South’s economic progress, plunge the region into chaos, imperil both Asia’s growing prosperity, and lessen its value as an increasingly open and lucrative marketplace for American products.

Bill Clinton needs to look at the high cost of appeasement in the 20th century. He not only needs to heed the words of Jefferson, he must also be aware of the price free states have paid throughout history for failing to act resolutely when threatened by armed tyrants. The lesson is always the same: weakness invites aggression. Clinton needs to take Jefferson’s words—and his own—seriously.

Seth Cropsey  
Director, Asian Studies Center

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