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Wrong Again:US policy on North Korea

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In June 1994, Bill Clinton came close to launching a 'pre-emptive strike' against North Korea's nuclear reactors at Yongbyon, about sixty miles north of Pyongyang. Then, at the last minute, Jimmy Carter got North Korea to agree to a complete freeze on activity at the Yongbyon complex, and a Framework Agreement was signed in October 1994. The Republican Right railed against this for the next six years, until George W. Bush brought a host of the Agreement's critics into his Administration, and they set about dismantling it, thus fulfilling their own prophecy and initiating another dangerous confrontation with Pyongyang. The same folks who brought us the invasion of Iraq and a menu of hyped-up warnings about Saddam Hussein's weapons have similarly exaggerated the North Korean threat: indeed, the second North Korean nuclear crisis began in October 2002, when 'sexed-up' intelligence was used to push Pyongyang against the wall and make bilateral negotiations impossible.

The complacent US public seems unperturbed by Bush's failure so far to find a single WMD in Iraq, even if the much more disputatious British public was immediately up in arms (so to speak) about the remarkable Intelligence failures that were used to justify the invasion. To grasp the full extent of this phenomenon one needs to be an indefatigable reader of America's best newspapers and best investigative reporters (all two of them). Take a long and detailed article by Judith Miller, buried on page 12 of the New York Times: only in the 30th paragraph of 34 do we learn that prewar American Intelligence on Iraqi weapons sites was often 'stunningly wrong'. In the words of a senior US officer:

> The teams would be given a packet, with pictures and a tentative grid . . . They would be told: 'Go to this place. You will find a McDonald's there. Look in the fridge. You will find French fries, cheeseburgers and Cokes.' And they would go there, and not only was there no fridge and no McDonald's, there was never even a thought of ever putting a McDonald's there. Day after day it was like that.

This officer's 'MET Alpha' group was sent to Basra to investigate equipment considered 'highly suspicious' by the Iraq Survey Group in US Intelligence, which thought that it had found possible components for nuclear weapons. What the team in fact discovered was 'a handful of large, industrial-scale vegetable steamers', their crates clearly and accurately marked as such in Russian.

There has been even less public scrutiny of Intelligence claims about the capabilities of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. For more than a decade, the CIA has maintained that Korea probably has one or two atomic bombs but no more than that, because the Koreans could not have reprocessed more than 11 or 12 kilograms of plutonium -- the maximum amount they could have obtained from their reactor in 1989. This conclusion was first included in a National Intelligence Estimate in November 1993, after all the government experts on North Korea had been gathered together and asked to put their hands up if they thought the North had atomic bombs. Just over half raised their hands. Those in the slim majority assumed that the North Koreans had reprocessed every last gram of the fuel removed in 1989, and had fashioned an

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implosion device that would detonate this plutonium -- no easy task. Still, the CIA referred only to nuclear 'devices', not bombs.

Every year since then the CIA Director has told Congress that 'the chances are better than 50:50' that North Korea has one or two bombs (not devices), and newspapers have routinely reported this assumption as fact. Yet in 1996, nuclear experts at the Livermore and Hanford laboratories reduced their estimate of how much fuel North Korea possessed to less than the amount needed for a single bomb: the North, they concluded, could only have seven or eight kilograms of fuel, whereas 'it takes ten kilograms of weapons-grade plutonium to fabricate a first bomb,' and eight or nine kilograms for subsequent ones. According to David Albright, one of the best and most reliable independent experts, 'the most credible worst-case estimate' is that the North may have between 6.3 and 8.5 kg of reprocessed plutonium. In other words, the CIA's educated guess, endlessly repeated in the media, appears to have been mistaken. A less obvious consequence of this mistake has been its role in strengthening the North's position in negotiations with the US.

The New York Times White House reporter David Sanger has published so many 'scoops' from US Intelligence that some of his colleagues just call him 'Scoop'. Unfortunately, quite a few have been wrong. Sanger has been particularly good at omitting all the CIA's qualifications about the one or two nuclear devices the North might or might not possess. In August 1998, the front page of the Times carried his story to the effect that Intelligence had located a huge underground facility where North Korea was secretly making nuclear weapons; this caused a predictable furor in the media. When the North (unprecedentedly) allowed the US military to inspect this site only to find it empty, and with no traces of radioactive material, the news barely made the headlines.

On 20 July this year, the New York Times led with a Sanger article (co-written with Thom Shanker) again claiming that US Intelligence had found 'a second, secret plant for producing weapons-grade plutonium'. A senior Administration official told the Times that this information was 'very worrisome, but still not conclusive'. The evidence consisted of 'elevated levels of krypton-85', a gas given off in the production of plutonium, in an area far removed from the Yongbyon complex where the North maintains its only declared reprocessing facility. The levels of krypton-85 were said to indicate a second, undeclared nuclear facility. South Korean experts immediately denied the story, and David Albright declared it was not in fact possible to pinpoint a hidden or secret location merely by detecting raised levels of krypton-85. Besides, the North can enrich uranium (as opposed to plutonium) at many sites, in small enough amounts for krypton-85 emissions not to rise above their normal level. In short, there appears to be no second facility.

The real pay-off in the Sanger/Shanker article came, as it had in Miller's article, in the closing paragraphs, which described the difficulties of a pre-emptive strike on the North's nuclear installations, given their recent dispersal to 'any number of other locations'. The Times claimed, for the first time in my daily reading, that the North had as many as 15,000 'underground military- industrial sites', and a history of 'constructing duplicate facilities' such that it may well have 'multiple facilities for every critical aspect of its national security infrastructure'. These facts have been known to experts for some time, and because they make it a bit tricky to launch pre-emptive strikes, the Bush Administration has been planning instead for a series of massive attacks against the North, using nuclear weapons.

The journalist who has most consistently challenged the Intelligence estimates coming out of the Bush Administration has been Seymour Hersh in the New Yorker . In the issue

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of 27 October he described how senior officials demand access to raw Intelligence before it has been vetted for accuracy and reliability by the CIA and other agencies, a process known as 'stovepiping'. This means that Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Paul Wolfowitz judge the veracity of reports from the field themselves (or with their staffers) without the information having first been 'subjected to rigorous scrutiny', and then rush the most damning reports into speeches, such as those intended to make the case for war in Iraq. Cheney has been particularly active, visiting the CIA, browbeating analysts and demanding access to raw information. In August 2002 he claimed publicly that Saddam 'continues to pursue a nuclear weapon'.

CIA estimates in the 1990s about North Korean weaponry, however questionable and flawed, seem both careful and modest compared to the exaggerations of the Bush Administration and its emissary to Pyongyang, James Kelly. Coming into office when the CIA's 'one or two devices' estimate was nearly a decade old, Bush contrived to hype the threat, while at the same time downplaying the idea that its size made a difference: the North might have two or six or eight atomic bombs, but that didn't constitute a crisis. Rather, Saddam Hussein -- whom we now know to have been disarmed by years of UN inspections -- was so much more dangerous as to justify a preventive war. The result was chaos as far as US policy was concerned, and free rein for North Korean hardliners to move ahead with producing nuclear weapons.

Bush resisted holding high-level talks with Pyongyang for more than a year after assuming office, although the Clinton Administration had left on the table a tentative agreement to buy out all of the North's medium and long-range missiles. When Bush finally dispatched Kelly to Pyongyang in October 2002, Kelly accused the North of having a second nuclear programme, to enrich uranium and build more bombs by that method. According to Kelly, his counterparts at first denied that they had such a programme, then admitted that they were developing not only an enriched-uranium bomb, but more powerful weapons as well. This news would have hit the press like a bombshell, but Bush delayed its release until he got his resolution enabling war in Iraq through Congress. All we have to go on for this strange episode is what Kelly chose to tell the press.

Within days of Kelly's return, Administration officials told the New York Times that the 1994 Agreement was dead. Then they cut off the supply of heavy heating oil that Washington had been providing as interim compensation under the Agreement. Pyongyang quickly announced that the Agreement had collapsed, withdrew from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, kicked out the UN inspectors, removed the seals and closed-circuit cameras from the Yongbyon complex, regained control of 8000 fuel rods that had been encased for eight years, and restarted their reactor. (Basically, this was a lock-step recapitulation of what they had done in 1993-94 in order to get Clinton's attention.) The North hinted darkly that the hostile policies of the Bush Administration left it no choice but to develop 'a powerful physical deterrent force'. In spite of all this, in the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the Administration continued to downplay its own evidence that the North now had not one but two bomb programmes and refused to call the situation a 'crisis'. This clearly confused the North: 'When we stated we don't have a nuclear weapon, the USA [said] we do have it,' one DPRK general told a Russian visitor, 'and now when we are [saying] we created nuclear weapons, the USA [says] we're just bluffing.'

What happened in October 2002 is that both Governments, according to Jonathan Pollack, a knowledgable specialist writing in the Naval War College Review , 'opted to exploit the intelligence for political purposes', and so to unravel 'close to a decade of painfully crafted diplomatic arrangements designed to prevent

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full-scale nuclear weapons development on the Korean Peninsula.' Pollack found that Bush's Intelligence estimates 'offered more definitive claims' about the North's nuclear capabilities than previous reports had done, and seemed to fudge the date when the CIA discovered evidence that the North had imported enriched-uranium technology -- this had happened in 1997 or 1998, and the Clinton Administration had fully briefed Bush and Co on the matter. Yet Kelly and others sat on the evidence for 18 months, then encouraged the press to assume that the programme had just been uncovered. Kelly never presented 'specific or detailed evidence to substantiate' his claims, either in Pyongyang or to the press when he returned home, nor did he ask his DPRK interlocutors for explanation or clarification of whatever evidence he may have brought with him.

The American press immediately accepted Kelly's judgment that the North Koreans had failed to honour their commitments, and the enriched-uranium programme took on a life of its own in the US media. In November 2002, the CIA reported that a gas centrifuge facility for enriching uranium was 'at least three years from becoming operational' in the DPRK; once up and running, however, it might provide fissile material for 'two or more weapons per year'. Yet Kelly told Congress in March 2003 that the facility (assuming there is one: US Intelligence can't find it) was probably 'a matter of months' away from producing weapons-grade uranium. Left unmentioned in any press articles I have come across is the usefulness of an enriched-uranium programme to the Light-Water Reactors (LWRs) that were being built to compensate the North for freezing their graphite reactors in 1994. The virtue of the LWRs from the American standpoint had been that their fuel would have to come from outside the DPRK, thus establishing a dependency that could easily be monitored; but this was precisely what the independent-minded North thought was wrong with the LWRs. As Pollack put it, 'it seems entirely plausible that Pyongyang envisioned the need for an indigenous enrichment capability' since 'the fuel requirements for a pair of thousand-megawatt [light water] reactors are substantial and open-ended.' Furthermore, to enrich uranium to a level where it is useful as LWR fuel is much easier than to refine it further, to create fissile fuel. But the Bush Administration smothered all discussion of this issue with its widely ballyhooed claims of a second nuclear bomb programme.

Many experts, including former Clinton Administration officials, believe that North Korea clearly cheated by importing this technology. They do not accept the argument that the North had a clear interest in enriching uranium for the LWRs; they differ over whether it merely experimented with the imported technology, or was (and is) hell-bent on a 'nuclear enrichment programme' -- in other words, if the North is trying to build a uranium bomb. If the imports from Pakistan did begin in 1997 or 1998 and were intended to be used in a bomb, the reason may have been that hardliners in Pyongyang disliked the slow pace at which Washington was implementing the commitments it had made in the 1994 Agreement (i.e. to normalise relations with the North and refrain from threatening it with nuclear weapons). Or Kim Jong Il may have chosen to play a double game, continuing to honour the Agreement while developing a clandestine weapons programme. Kim ascended to supreme power in September 1998, on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the regime, and a new weapons programme would have shored up his support among the military.

The Clinton Administration officials, however, believe that whatever the North planned to do, its enrichment technology could have been shut down if the missile deal had been completed and relations between the US and the DPRK normalised. That was essentially what they told

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the incoming Bush Administration. By dithering for 18 months, only to use the information in order to confront the North Koreans in October 2002, the Bush people turned a soluble problem into a major crisis, in which neither side had any room to back away. Now the North may have embarked on a nuclear weapons programme far beyond the CIA's 'one or two devices', which would be a catastrophic defeat for American diplomacy; and no one -- in Washington, Pyongyang, Beijing or Moscow -- really knows what Bush wants from his Korea policy.

One interpretation of Kelly's behaviour in Pyongyang is that he pre-emptively used a bunch of Intelligence reports (ones never fully released to the media) to make sure there could be no diplomatic progress -- his visit came in the wake of Bush's new doctrine of pre-emption, announced in September 2002. The danger now derives from a combination of typical and predictable North Korean cheating and provocation, long-standing US plans to use nuclear weapons in the earliest stages of a new Korean war, and the Bush Doctrine. This last conflates existing plans for nuclear pre-emption in a crisis initiated by the North -- a standard operating procedure for the US military for decades -- with an apparent determination to attack states like North Korea simply because they have or want to have nuclear weapons like those the US still amasses by the thousand. As if to make this completely clear, someone in the White House leaked Presidential Decision Directive 17 in September 2002, which listed North Korea as a prime target for pre-emption.

Donald Rumsfeld made matters worse in the spring of 2003 by demanding revisions in the basic war plan for Korea ('Operations Plan 5030'). The strategy, according to insiders who have read the plan, is 'to topple Kim's regime by destabilising its military forces', who would then overthrow him and bring about a 'regime change'. The plan was pushed, according to an article in US News and World Report , 'by many of the same Administration hard-liners who advocated regime change in Iraq'. Unnamed senior officials considered elements of this new plan to be 'so aggressive that they could provoke a war'. Short of attacking or trying to bring about a military coup, Rumsfeld and Co wanted the US military to 'stage a weeks-long surprise military exercise, designed to force North Koreans to head for bunkers and deplete valuable stores of food, water and other resources'. This is oddly reminiscent of 1950, when North Korea announced a long military exercise along the 38th parallel, mobilising some 40,000 troops. In the middle of the exercise, several divisions suddenly veered south and in three days took Seoul; only a handful of the highest officials knew that the summer exercises were the prelude to an invasion. Half a century later comes Rumsfeld, with his provocative plans, a man who according to two eyewitnesses was surprised to learn when he joined the Pentagon that the US still had nearly 40,000 troops in Korea.

In 1958, the US began to deploy hundreds of nuclear warheads, atomic mines, artillery shells and air-dropped nukes in South Korea. They remained there until 1991, when Bush the Elder withdrew battlefield nuclear weapons from around the world -- which did not end the nuclear threat to the North, since Trident submarines can glide silently up to its coast any day of the week. Kim Il Sung's response to the initial nuclear deployments of the late 1950s was to build as widely and as deeply underground as possible, on the assumption, he admitted quite openly, that anything visible above ground would be wiped out in a war. I have seen one nuclear blast shelter, at the bottom of a very steep escalator in a Pyongyang subway station, where three gigantic blast doors, each about two feet thick, are recessed into the wall. Hans Blix was astonished, when he conducted the first UN inspections of the Yongbyon nuclear site in 1992, to find 'two cavernous underground shelters', access to which required 'several minutes to descend by

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escalator'. They were built, Blix was told, in case the complex was attacked with nuclear weapons. US commanders in the South believe nearly the entire military apparatus of this garrison state is now ensconced underground. Since this, as I said earlier, makes pre-emptive strikes on installations rather tricky, Rumsfeld has been planning instead for a pre-emptive strike on Yongbyon followed by a series of massive nuclear strikes against multiple targets.

The vehicles for these strikes are new missiles that are said to penetrate deep underground before detonating a 'small' nuclear explosive. Earlier this year Rumsfeld sought a Congressional repeal of the decade-old ban on the manufacture of small nuclear weapons. According to the New York Times, Congressional proponents, mainly Republicans, argued that 'low-yield' nuclear warheads 'could be used to incinerate chemical or biological weapons installations without scattering deadly agents into the atmosphere'. But the Bush Administration believed 'low-yield' nukes would be more effective in deterring 'emerging nuclear powers like North Korea and Iran'. These new earth-penetrating weapons would have hardened casings (probably made of depleted uranium) enabling them 'to crash through thick rock and concrete'. Opponents in the Senate argued that repealing the Bill would signal the end of efforts at non-proliferation: 'We're driving recklessly down the road that we're telling other people not to walk down,' the Michigan Senator Carl Levin said.

JAPAN

The only problem with Rumsfeld's war plan is that no technology yet developed or imagined can penetrate the earth's surface for more than about fifty feet, which is why cruise missiles could not eliminate Saddam Hussein on the night the Iraq invasion began (even if, that is, he was in the building targeted): later inspections revealed deep and heavily reinforced chambers designed by a German firm to withstand a direct hit from nuclear weapons. The only answer is larger and larger warheads, so that you target Kim Jong Il and wipe out a large urban neighbourhood, or maybe a city.

Before the occupation of Iraq dimmed their clairvoyant powers, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz and Co imagined that Kim Jong Il was running around in fear like an ant in a frying pan. Kim disappeared from public view for fifty days from mid-February 2003. When he surfaced again, 'a senior Defense Department official' (most likely Rumsfeld or Wolfowitz) told the Times: 'Truly, if I'm Kim Jong Il, I wake up tomorrow morning and I'm thinking: "Have the Americans arrayed themselves on the peninsula now, post-Iraq, the way they arrayed themselves in Iraq?"' The US wanted to get its own forces in Korea out of range of the North's artillery, the official said, and then increase reconnaissance and redeploy to 'use precision targeting much more aggressively and much more quickly'. In pursuit of this policy, the Pentagon moved 24 long-range B-1 and B-52 bombers from bases in the US to Guam shortly before the invasion of Iraq, and installed several F-117 stealth fighter-bombers in bases in South Korea -- they are 'designed for quick strikes against targets ringed by heavy air defences'. Soon Wolfowitz was in Seoul, to announce a redeployment of US combat forces south of the Han River to get them out of harm's way, and in passing to tell the world's press that 'North Korea is teetering on the brink of collapse.'

These provocative actions might well have instigated another Korean war, given what had just happened in Iraq; short of that, they shame the US in their combination of arrogance and ignorance. Loud in prattling about American sovereignty when it comes to the UN, these officials see no other country whose sovereignty they feel bound to respect. Furthermore, they don't know what they're

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talking about. Kim Jong Il's birthday is 16 February, a national holiday, and long disappearances (particularly during the harsh winter) have been a trademark of his rule: he husbands his 'quality time', puttering around one of his villas in pyjamas and curlers, taking it easy and trying to tame his unruly hair. A better indication of the North's attitude is its statement on 18 April: 'The Iraqi war teaches a lesson that in order to prevent a war and defend the security of a country and the sovereignty of a nation it is necessary to have a powerful physical deterrent force' (the euphemism North Korea has used since Kelly's visit to suggest that it might possess nuclear weapons). Clearly, the North Koreans do not want war; in the same news release they signalled for the first time that they were willing to meet the US in multilateral talks: 'If the US has a willingness to make a bold switchover in its Korea policy, we will not stick to any particular dialogue format.' But it would be a mistake to assume that if war comes to them, they won't go down fighting.

After Kelly's visit, Bush's strategy was to refuse to talk to the North about anything except how it would go about dismantling its nuclear programme -- and to refuse bilateral talks even for this purpose. He offered no incentives in return. The requirement that any talks be multilateral, however, was aimed primarily at East Asian allies whom Bush perceived to be getting off the reservation. Republican Presidents consistently supported the dictators who ruled South Korea for three decades. In 1972, Nixon looked the other way when Park Chung Hee declared martial law and made himself President for life. The first visiting head of state to be invited to the Oval Office by Reagan was Chun Doo Hwan, who had killed hundreds, if not thousands, of the population of Kwangju on the way to his 1980 coup. Many specialists remain convinced that a Republican team jiggered the vote-counting computers during the 1987 Presidential election that brought Chun's protégé, Roh Tae Woo, to power.

In 2002, the Bush Administration seemed to think the candidate of the old ruling party, Lee Hoi Chang, had a lock on the next Presidential election; when he came to Washington in the autumn, the Administration treated him like a king. Instead, the Korean people elected Roh Moo Hyun, a courageous lawyer who had defended many dissidents against the Chun and Roh regimes. In his campaign, Roh had promised to establish greater independence and equality in the relationship with the US, and to continue his predecessor Kim Dae Jung's policy of reconciliation with the North.

After Roh's election, the American press was full of rhetoric about 'anti-Americanism' in the South, and scare stories about Korean ingrates wanting to kick US forces out of the country. 'There are already signs of a deep distrust of Mr Roh in the Bush Administration,' a reporter wrote just before Roh's inauguration. 'Kim Jong Il would probably attack our troops on the DMZ,' a senior military analyst stated, 'and then pick up the phone to Roh and say . . . "You must do something to stop the Americans."' Robyn Lim, a 'regional security expert' at Nanzan University in Japan, declared that 'the US alliance with South Korea is defunct.' Around this time, advisers to Roh told US officials that if the US attacked the North without South Korean consent, that would destroy the alliance with the South. Another anti-American comment? Imagine how Americans would feel if a distant power wanted to make war on Canada without consulting Washington, while Canada had 10,000 embedded artillery guns trained on the US.

Roh was the first victor in a democratic election involving two major candidates to get close to a majority since 1971, when Park Chung Hee barely defeated Kim Dae Jung, in spite of all sorts of manipulation (Park then decided there would be no more elections). But his success occasioned remarkable petulance,

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even (or especially) from Americans who have had long experience in Korea. Richard Allen, a Republican point man on Korean affairs, wrote in the Times that Roh Moo Hyun's election made for 'a troubling shift' in US relations with the ROK. Korean leaders, he said, had now 'stepped into the neutral zone'; indeed, he added, they had even gone so far as to suggest that, in the current nuclear stand-off, Washington and Pyongyang should both make concessions: 'The cynicism of this act constitutes a serious breach of faith.' Maybe American troops should be withdrawn, Allen suggested, 'now that the harm can come from two directions -- North Korea and violent South Korean protesters'. In his opinion, the US 'is responsible for much of Seoul's present security and prosperity', the implication being that Koreans shouldn't bite the hand that feeds them.

Other Americans wondered how Koreans dared to criticise the US when North Korea was 'rattling a nuclear sword'. A Pentagon official explained: 'It's like teaching a child to ride a bike. We've been running alongside South Korea, holding onto its handlebars for 50 years. At some point you have to let go.' Another military official in Seoul said when Roh was elected: 'There is a real sense of mourning here' (on his military base). Meanwhile, American business interests warned that troop withdrawals would cause investors to 'seriously reconsider . . . their plans here'. It's amazing that this combination of irritability and condescension should seem so unremarkable both to the people who make such comments, and (often) to the reporters who quote them. A recent Gallup Poll in South Korea showed an increase in the number of those who 'disliked' the United States from 15 per cent in 1994 to 53 per cent in 2003. When they were asked if they 'liked' the US 37 per cent said yes, as against 64 per cent in 1994.

Meanwhile, the Japanese Prime Minister, Junichiro Koizumi, was planning his own breakthrough with North Korea. Negotiations for a summit with Kim Jong Il 'had been conducted with the utmost secrecy' over several months. After a secret visit to Pyongyang in August 2002, an adviser to Koizumi told him the North Koreans were receptive to anything Koizumi might want to discuss, including allegations that the North had in the past kidnapped Japanese citizens. Koizumi finally decided to tell the Bush Administration about his plans on 27 August 2002, when the Deputy Secretary of State, Richard Armitage, was visiting Tokyo. Jonathan Pollack later wrote that 'the absence of prior communication between Japan and the United States on the Prime Minister's impending visit was remarkable enough in its own right. In the context of recent Intelligence findings about North Korea's [nuclear] enrichment activities, the Prime Minister's last-minute disclosure . . . was even more stunning to American officials.'

Soon James Kelly was in Tokyo, where he spent three days tabling his evidence about the North's nuclear-enrichment programme and trying to persuade Koizumi not to meet Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang. He failed. Koi-zumi flew off in mid-September, and Kim Jong Il took the unprecedented step of admitting that his regime had indeed kidnapped a number of Japanese, for espionage purposes. This caused outrage in Japan, and instead of a diplomatic breakthrough, Koizumi had a huge public relations problem on his hands. A few weeks later Kelly showed up in Pyongyang, to confront the North with this same 'evidence', which had the effect of derailing a further rapprochement between Pyongyang and Tokyo, and providing a weapon with which to pressure Roh Moo Hyun back into the fold.

I was in Seoul when Koizumi's summit was announced, a day or two after John Bolton (the so-called 'Under-Secretary of State for Arms Control' in an Administration that has wrecked arms control) arrived to denounce Kim Jong Il personally and his regime more generally as

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evil, a menace to peace, the greatest security threat in the region etc. He did this again in the summer of 2003, as six-party talks on the North Korean problem were about to be held in Beijing. A brutal tyrant had North Korea in the grip of 'a hellish nightmare', he said, causing Armitage publicly to distance himself from Bolton's rhetoric. When a reporter from the Times asked Bolton what the Bush policy was towards the North, 'he strode over to a bookshelf, pulled off a volume and slapped it on the table. It was called The End of North Korea , and was by an American Enterprise Institute colleague. "That," he said, "is our policy."'

It is the President's policy, too. From the beginning of his term, Bush has denounced Kim Jong Il as an untrustworthy madman, a 'pygmy', an 'evildoer'. In a recent discussion with Bob Woodward, he blurted out, 'I loathe Kim Jong Il,' shouting and 'waving his finger in the air'. He also declared his preference for 'toppling' the North Korean regime. (Maybe Bush's resentments have something to do with the widespread perception that both leaders owe their position to Daddy.)

Shortly before the 50th anniversary of the end of the Korean War in 1953, the former Defense Secretary William Perry gave a harrowing interview to the Washington Post. He had just finished extensive consultations with senior officials in the Bush Administration, the South Korean President and senior officials in China. 'I think we are losing control' of the situation, he said: we are on a 'path to war'. North Korea might soon have enough nuclear warheads to begin exploding them in tests or exporting them to terrorists. 'The nuclear programme now underway in North Korea poses an imminent danger of nuclear weapons being detonated in American cities,' he charged -- an absurdity, since in retaliation the US would turn the North into 'a charcoal briquette' (Colin Powell's expression). But then Perry got to the main point: Bush just won't enter into serious talks with Pyongyang. 'The reason we don't have a policy on this, and we aren't negotiating,' he suggested, 'is the President himself. I think he has come to the conclusion that Kim Jong Il is evil and loathsome and it is immoral to negotiate with him.' Thus do an insecure, reclusive dictator and an insecure, impulsive foreign affairs naif hold the peace of the world in their hands. A less alarmist and, with luck, more accurate view came from Jae-Jung Suh, a scholar who knows as much about Korean security as anyone: 'The fundamental difference between Clinton's near success and Bush's stalemate lies . . . in his refusal to end the enmity between the two nations.'

During the Iraq War Colin Powell gained control -- perhaps temporarily -- of Korea policy (the Vulcan Group of Pentagon civilian appointees complained that they were too distracted to block what he was doing) and persuaded Bush to allow Kelly to meet the North Koreans again, in Beijing in April, and then to participate in the six-party talks that China arranged at the end of August. David Sanger heralded these talks as a sign that the Administration had fundamentally altered its approach to the North. The mess in Iraq had enhanced Powell's stature, another reporter wrote, and Bush had decided he needed help from UN allies and friends after all. Time will tell if Bush's sudden desire for talks with the North and assistance from other countries really signifies a change; optimistic analysts said similar things when Powell took the Iraq problem to the UN in September 2002. If it does, and if Bush gets an agreement, he will only be back where the Clinton Administration was when he took over.

For more than a decade, the North Koreans have been trying to get American officials to understand that genuine give- and-take negotiations on their nuclear programme could be successful, based on the terms of a 'package deal' that they first tabled in November 1993. The North has steadfastly said it would give up its nukes and missiles in return for a formal

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end to the Korean War, a termination of mutual hostility, the lifting of numerous economic and technological embargoes, diplomatic recognition, and direct or indirect compensation for giving up very expensive programmes. Their willingness to do this was tested in 1994, when they froze their nuclear complex and kept it frozen under the eyes of UN inspectors for eight years.

Michael O'Hanlon and Mike Mochizuki recently revived what they describe in Crisis on the Korean Peninsula: How to Deal with a Nuclear North Korea (McGraw-Hill, 172 pp., $19.95, July, 0071431551) as a 'grand diplomatic bargain': in return for a verifiable end to the North's nuclear programmes, a ban on selling and testing its missiles, a steep cut in its conventional forces, outward-looking economic reforms and the beginnings of a dialogue about human rights in the North (or the lack of them), Washington should be ready to respond with a non-aggression pledge, a peace treaty that would finally end the Korean War, full diplomatic relations, and an aid programme of 'perhaps $2 billion a year for a decade' (that burden to be shared with America's allies). They muster a host of nuanced, clever and convincing arguments in support of their strategy, with the ultimate goal 'a gradual, soft, "velvet" form of regime change -- even if Kim Jong Il holds onto power throughout the process'. We could have that, or we could have more dangerous drift in US policy, or a terrible war. Unfortunately, the choice is in the hands of a capricious Administration that listens to nobody, and a jumpy group in Pyongyang.

Many believe that the North Korean regime is among the most despicable on earth (I watched a former US Ambassador to Japan lecture President Roh on this point at a Blue House meeting on the day after Roh's inauguration), and that for a tyrant like Kim Jong Il to get his hands on nuclear weapons would be a calamity, to be stopped at all costs. I would urge those who think this way to remember that 23 million people live in the North, that the country has had huge piles of chemical weapons for decades, and perhaps biological weapons, too; we have deterred them from using these weapons for half a century with our nuclear weapons, and if the North deters the warmongers among the Vulcan Group with those same weapons, that may be the best we can hope for.

The 'North Korean problem' is an outgrowth of a terrible history going all the way back to the collapse of the international system in the Great Depression and the world war that followed it, a history throughout which the Korean people have suffered beyond measure and beyond any American's imagination. We could have solved the North Korean problem years ago but our leaders have chosen not to try (Clinton is an exception), and in this new century we are all the worse for it.

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