The Washington Post

Wednesday, October 11,2006; page A19

In Search of a North Korea Policy

By William J. Perry

North Korea's declared nuclear bomb test program will increase the incentives for other nations to go nuclear, will endanger security in the region and could ultimately result in nuclear terrorism. While this test is the culmination of North Korea's long-held aspiration to become a nuclear power, it also demonstrates the total failure of the Bush administration's policy toward that country. For almost six years this policy has been a strange combination of harsh rhetoric and inaction.

President Bush, early in his first term, dubbed North Korea a member of the "axis of evil" and made disparaging remarks about Kim Jong Il. He said he would not tolerate a North Korean nuclear weapons program, but he set no bounds on North Korean actions.

The most important such limit would have been on reprocessing spent fuel from North Korea's reactor to make plutonium. The Clinton administration declared in 1994 that if North Korea reprocessed, it would be crossing a "red line," and it threatened military action if that line was crossed. The North Koreans responded to that pressure and began negotiations that led to the Agreed Framework. The Agreed Framework did not end North Korea's aspirations for nuclear weapons, but it did result in a major delay. For more than eight years, under the Agreed Framework, the spent fuel was kept in a storage pond under international supervision.

Then in 2002, the Bush administration discovered the existence of a covert program in uranium, evidently an attempt to evade the Agreed Framework. This program, while potentially serious, would have led to a bomb at a very slow rate, compared with the more mature plutonium program. Nevertheless, the administration unwisely stopped compliance with the Agreed Framework. In response the North Koreans sent the inspectors home and announced their intention to reprocess. The administration deplored the action but set no "red line." North Korea made the plutonium.

The administration also said early this summer that a North Korean test of long-range missiles was unacceptable. North Korea conducted a multiple-launch test of missiles on July 4. Most recently, the administration said a North Korean test of a nuclear bomb would be unacceptable. A week later North Korea conducted its first test.

It appears that the administration is deeply divided on how to deal with North Korea, with some favoring negotiation and others economic and political pressure to force a regime change. As a result, while the administration was willing to send a representative to the six-party talks organized by the Chinese in 2003, it had no apparent strategy for dealing with North Korea there or for providing leadership to the other parties. In the meantime, it increased economic pressure on Pyongyang. Certainly an argument can be made for such pressure, but it would be naive to

think it could succeed without the support of the Chinese and South Korean governments, neither of which backs such action. North Korea, sensing the administration's paralysis, has moved ahead with an aggressive and dangerous nuclear program.

So what can be done now that might have a constructive influence on North Korea's behavior? The attractive alternatives are behind us. There should and will be a U.N. resolution condemning the test. The United Nations may respond to calls from the United States and Japan for strong sanctions to isolate North Korea and cut off trade with it. But North Korea is already the most isolated nation in the world, and its government uses this isolation to its advantage. Stronger sanctions on materials that might be of use to the nuclear program are reasonable, but the horse is already out of the barn. Economic sanctions to squeeze North Korea would increase the suffering of its people but would have little effect on the elite. In any event, they would be effective only if China and South Korea fully participated, and they have shown no inclination to do so.

There will be calls to accelerate our national missile defense program. But the greatest danger to the United States from this program is not that North Korea would be willing to commit suicide by firing a missile at the United States, even if it did develop one of sufficient range. Rather, it is the possibility that the North Koreans will sell one of the bombs or some of their plutonium to a terrorist group. The president has warned North Korea not to transfer any materials from its nuclear program. But the warnings we have sent to North Korea these past six years have gone unheeded and its acts unpunished. It is not clear that this latest one will have any greater effect. If a warning is to have a chance of influencing North Korea's behavior it has to be much more specific. It would have to promise retaliation against North Korea if a terrorist detonated a nuclear bomb in one of our cities. It must be backed by a meaningful forensics program that can identify the source of a nuclear bomb.

This test will certainly send an undesirable message to Iran, and that damage has already been done. But it is important to try to keep this action from precipitating a nuclear arms race in the Asia-Pacific region. Both Japan and South Korea have the capability to move quickly to full nuclear-weapon status but have not done so because they have had confidence in our nuclear umbrella. They may now reevaluate their decision. We should consult closely with Japan and South Korea to reassure them that they are still under our umbrella and that we have the will and the capability to regard an attack on them as an attack on the United States. This may be necessary to discourage them from moving forward with nuclear deterrence of their own.

Our government's inattention has allowed North Korea to establish a new and dangerous threat to the Asia-Pacific region. It is probably too late to reverse that damage, but serious attention to this problem can still limit the extent of the damage.

The writer was secretary of defense from 1994 to 1997.