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The Case for a Preemptive Strike on North Korea's Missiles

Viewpoint: Former Clinton administration officials Ashton Carter and William Perry argue that the most effective way to curb the threat from Pyongyang is to destroy its missiles at their test sites

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The Bush Administration has tried to downplay the mounting danger posed by North Korea. That might be the understandable reaction of officials necessarily preoccupied with the ongoing campaign in Iraq. But it is not prudent or safe. Although the July 4 test of the Taepo Dong 2 missile—which is intended to carry nuclear warheads to U.S. territory—appears to have failed, North Korea conducted the test so its engineers could learn how to perfect the missile, and even a failed test provides critical data. More important is the test's symbolic significance: once again North Korea has crossed a line in the sand clearly drawn by the U.S. and its partners.

We anticipated that North Korea would ignore the U.S.'s warnings. That's why, in an opinion piece published in the Washington Post on June 22, we urged the Bush Administration to strike the Taepo Dong 2 on its launchpad before the test could be conducted. "Surgical strike" is a much abused term, but destroying a test missile as it is being readied for launch qualifies for this category because only one U.S. cruise missile or precision bomb with an ordinary high-explosive warhead could easily puncture and ignite the multistory test booster. As with space-shuttle launches from Cape Canaveral, all personnel would normally be a safe distance away from the rocket at the time, so there should be no collateral damage.

Critics of our article, including members of the Bush Administration, say that a preemptive strike is too risky. But if the U.S. is ever going to defend a line in the sand with North Korea, that is the least provocative way to do it, and next time it will only be riskier. Such a strike could be seen by the North Korean leadership for what it is: a limited act of defense of the U.S. homeland against a gathering threat, and not an overall attack on North Korea. Pyongyang tries carefully to cultivate the impression that it will lash out in response to any action against it, however limited. But would it truly retaliate against South Korea, which has been working hard to improve North-South relations, in response to a U.S. airstrike? Such a war would surely and swiftly end in the elimination of the North Korean regime. Pyongyang's leaders are bold, but they are not suicidal.

For the U.S., the risk of inaction will prove far greater. The Pyongyang regime will view its stockpile of missiles and nuclear material as tipping the regional balance in its favor

and providing a shield behind which it can pursue its interests with impunity. Worse, North Korea has a long history of selling its advanced weapons to countries in the Middle East, and it operates a black market in other forms of contraband. Like Pakistan's rogue nuclear engineer A.Q. Khan, North Korean officials might be tempted to sell the ingredients of their arsenal to terrorists. Finally, many expect North Korea's failed economy to lead one day to the regime's collapse. Who then might get its loose nukes?

So what should be done to begin to rein in the runaway North Korean nuclear and missile programs? First, we continue to advise the U.S. government to strike any further Taepo Dong test missiles before they can be launched. Second, the North should be penalized for defying the international community's unanimous appeal not to conduct its July 4 tests. China and South Korea are the main economic benefactors of North Korea, and President Bush is right to seek a United Nations Security Council action that would compel all nations to suspend trade with Pyongyang.

For years, the U.S. has been paralyzed by a division in the Bush Administration between one camp that favors diplomacy with Pyongyang and another camp that hopes for the early collapse of the regime. But the net result has been that neither policy has been pursued consistently. Instead, Washington has outsourced the North Korea issue to regional players in the form of the "Six Party" talks, a strategy that has failed to produce any results except plutonium and missile tests. South Korea, China and Russia have offered only carrots while carefully avoiding the threat of sticks—yet both carrots and sticks are essential ingredients of any successful diplomacy.

The "Six Party" talks are the right forum for diplomacy, but ultimately, what matters less than who is at the table is whether the U.S. has a clear strategy. We won't know whether North Korea's ambitions can be blunted by anything short of the use of force unless and until the U.S. takes the danger seriously and gets in the game.

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