

The National Interest *online*

Nuclear Realities

by Ted Galen Carpenter

06.11.2009

Recent events suggest that the U.S.-led strategy for dealing with the nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea is not only likely to fail, but the mere attempt may also produce an especially bad outcome.

President Obama's response to North Korea's nuclear test encapsulated Washington's approach. Pyongyang, he indicated, faces a stark choice. If Kim Jong-il's regime abandons its quest for nuclear weapons, there is an opportunity for North Korea to gradually become a normal member of the international community and enjoy an array of diplomatic and economic benefits. Conversely, the president warned, Pyongyang would only "deepen its own isolation" if it continued its attempt to develop a nuclear arsenal. Washington has backed up the president's warning by pushing for tighter economic sanctions from the UN Security Council.

The Obama administration's approach to Iran is a bit more subtle and nuanced, but it ultimately hints at a similar binary choice. The key difference is, as Obama indicated in his Cairo speech, that Iran would be allowed to have a "peaceful" nuclear program—as long as Tehran abided by all international agreements and safeguards for such programs. The United States has never been as flexible regarding North Korea. Washington's goal remains a complete, verifiable and irreversible end to Pyongyang's entire nuclear program.

Although the Obama administration's offer of carrots is more generous to Tehran than to Pyongyang, the stick remains essentially the same: painful isolation of both countries if they refuse to cooperate. But U.S. policy makers need to ask whether that threat is either feasible or wise. Evidence suggests that it is neither.

Washington is unlikely to achieve the degree of isolation that might compel either North Korea or Iran to change its policies. Although Beijing is upset with its North Korean client for the latest nuclear and missile tests, Chinese officials have steadfastly opposed imposing truly rigorous sanctions on Kim Jong-il's regime. And without China's full-fledged cooperation, economic sanctions against Pyongyang will prove only marginally effective.

The chances of successfully isolating Iran are even more remote. Both Russia and China have dragged their feet about tougher measures against Tehran, and the existing sanctions system leaks badly. Moreover, unlike small, poverty-stricken North Korea, Iran is a midsize power with considerable clout in its region.

Washington's strategy is likely to prove just effective enough to cause those countries economic problems, thereby irrevocably antagonizing both regimes and creating even greater incentives for dangerous behavior. U.S. policy makers need to face some troubling realities. First, it seems increasingly unlikely that either Tehran or Pyongyang will be dissuaded from pursuing nuclear ambitions. Short of launching military strikes to take out their programs—a step that could easily trigger full-scale wars in the Persian Gulf and Northeast Asia—the global nuclear weapons club will probably have two new members within the next few years.

That being the case, policy makers need to ask themselves whether it is a good idea to try to isolate those countries. For the United States in particular, do we really want a situation in which we have

no formal relations with two nuclear-armed powers?

Such a strategy would be extremely dangerous. Working to isolate those regimes would exacerbate tensions and increase the possibility of a fatal miscalculation. For example, if the United States and other countries impose additional economic sanctions on an already impoverished North Korea, the incentives would increase for Pyongyang to seek revenues from other sources. And one such source would be to sell nuclear technology to any paying customer.

Pyongyang and Tehran are also aware that Washington has previously tried to use the isolation strategy against other “breakout” nuclear powers, without much success. The United States and its allies sought to use sanctions to get India and Pakistan to reverse course following their nuclear tests and the deployment of arsenals in the late 1990s. Those measures seem like quaint memories today, as the United States soon concluded that it needed to forge close ties with both countries.

It is likely that despite issuing threats and waging ineffective campaigns to impose sanctions against North Korea and Iran, the United States and the rest of the international community will ultimately have to accept reality and come to terms with the newest members of the global nuclear-weapons club. Trying to isolate nuclear powers, even obnoxious and unpredictable ones like Iran and North Korea, is a futile and potentially dangerous approach. A better strategy is to hold our noses and attempt to establish a reasonably normal diplomatic and economic relationship with such countries.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (2008). He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.

> Subscribe Now to The National Interest <

Copyright © 2006 The National Interest All rights reserved. | [Legal Terms](#)
P: (800) 344-7952, Outside the U.S.: (856) 380-4130 | backissues@nationalinterest.org
P.O. Box 9001, Maple Shade, NJ 08052-9662

The National Interest is published by The Nixon Center

The Nixon Center
1615 L Street, Suite 1250
Washington, DC 20036
www.nixoncenter.org