A ROGUE BY ANY OTHER NAME

RULED BY A DICTATOR WHO THREATENS THE REST OF THE WORLD, NORTH KOREA LOOKS LIKE THE PERFECT FOE. BUT THAT ISN'T THE WHOLE STORY.

BY LEON V. SIGAL

What's in a name? Plenty, if that name is "rogue state" or "pariah state." Rogue states, or pariahs with aggressive intent, are said to be the main proliferation menace in the world. Yet the United States does not brand Pakistan with either of those labels, even though it may have done more than any other country to enable other states to obtain nuclear arms.

North Korea has not been as fortunate as Pakistan. To many Americans, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea is the archetypal rogue state: implacable and inimical, with a master plan to deceive the world and acquire

nuclear weapons. Its one-man rule, its internal regimentation and its dogmatism would alienate any freedom-loving American. Pyongyang's harsh diatribes against Washington, its penchant for brinkmanship and its nasty habit of floating concessions on a sea of threats all continue to antagonize even the most level-headed observers. So did its past acts of terrorism, like the 1983 bombing in Rangoon that barely missed South Korea's President Chun Doo-hwan and killed 17 members of his entourage.

Pyongyang's harsh diatribes against Washington and penchant for brinkmanship have antagonized even the most level-headed observers.

Yes, in many respects, North Korea makes a perfect foe. Yet ever since 1988, it has been trying to end its historic enmity against the United States. Beginning in that year, it stopped sponsoring terrorist acts against other states, and even softened its anti-American rhetoric. Nevertheless, the image of a rogue state ruled by a latter-day Genghis Khan has been difficult to shake, leaving the North an easy target for demonization.

Name-calling does more than foster a domestic political climate of hostility. It also infects official thinking. Epithets like "rogue" or "pariah" become a pernicious premise of U.S. policy and intelligence estimates, blinding officials to the motives of states for acquiring nuclear weapons. They predispose American policymakers to take a coercive approach to stopping the spread of nuclear arms, threatening isolation, economic sanctions and military force. And they impede diplomatic give-and-take, which is the best way to probe the intentions of such states and try to induce them to change course.

After all, a rogue is a criminal, and the only way to handle criminals is to punish them.

Yet, again and again, the crime-and-punishment approach has failed to dissuade states from seeking their own nuclear arsenals. By contrast, American reassurances and inducements have a long record of accomplishment. They helped convince South Korea, Taiwan, Sweden, Brazil, Argentina, South Africa, Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan to abandon their nuclear ambitions. Only with Iraq and Pakistan did such efforts fail.

The Good Cop Approach

Branding potential proliferators as rogue states actually gets in the way of disarming them. Washington would be better off referring to them by a more appropriate name — perhaps "insecure states" — and treating them accordingly. That means offering encouragement and incentives instead of threats to get such governments to stop arming, and moving to contain and deter them only if that approach fails.

Hard-liners dismiss such talk as sympathy for the aggressor. They take it on faith, for example, that Pyongyang is motivated by paranoid hostility to America and will not stop its campaign to become a full-fledged nuclear power. So what if it is reaching out to its neighbors and the world and establishing diplomatic ties with them? That's just a tactic. So what if it agreed to freeze its plutonium program in 1994 — the only nuclear weapons program it then had? That was just a ruse to dupe the credulous while it began acquiring the means to enrich uranium.

So what if the DPRK is now offering to freeze and dismantle its nuclear weapons programs — if only the United States will normalize political and economic relations and provide assurances that it won't attack, interfere in its internal affairs, or impede its economic development by maintaining sanctions and discouraging aid and investment from its neighbors? Even to discuss such proposals, say the hard-liners, would amount to coddling criminals, or in their favorite turn of phrase, rewarding bad behavior.

But the trouble is that by not upholding the 1994 Agreed Framework, the United States failed to reward North Korea's good behavior, even though the accord gave Washington what it most wanted up front: a freeze of Pyongyang's plutonium production, a program that

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by now could have generated enough nuclear material for at least 50 bombs. But when the Republicans won control of Congress just days after the October 1994 accord was signed, they quickly denounced the deal as appeasement. Shying away from taking them on, the Clinton administration backpedaled on implementing the agreement. As a result, Washington did little easing of sanctions until 2000. Having pledged to provide two nuclear power plants "by a target date of 2003," it did not even pour concrete for the first foundation until August 2002. It did deliver heavy fuel oil as promised, but seldom on schedule. Above all, it did not live up to its commitment in Article II of the accord to "move toward full normalization of political and economic relations" — to end enmity and lift sanctions.

Epithets like "rogue" or "pariah" have predisposed American policy-makers to take a coercive approach to states like North Korea.

When Washington was slow to fulfill the terms of the accord, Pyongyang threatened to break out of it in 1997. Its acquisition of gas centrifuges to enrich uranium from Pakistan began soon thereafter. Yet that was a pilot program, not the operational capability U.S. intelligence says it moved to acquire in 2001 after the Bush administration refused talks and instead disclosed that the North was a target for nuclear attack. However, U.S. hard-liners took it as conclusive evidence (as if they needed any) that North Korea was hellbent on arming. After confronting Pyongyang over enrichment in October 2002, Washington retaliated by halting shipment of heavy fuel oil promised under the Agreed Framework.

The Road to Pyongyang

Hard-liners were convinced that Iraq's fate would chasten North Korea. On the day Saddam Hussein's statue was toppled from its pedestal in Baghdad, Under Secretary of State John Bolton declared, "We are hopeful that a number of regimes will draw the appropriate lesson from Iraq."

Yet, far from becoming more pliable, North Korea became more determined to arm itself — and will remain so until the United States changes course. In 2003, as U.S. troops were deploying to the Persian Gulf, Pyongyang challenged Washington by lighting two nuclear fuses. It resumed reprocessing to extract plutonium from nuclear fuel rods that it had removed from its reactor in 1994 but had stored since then at Yongbyon under international inspectors' scrutiny. And it resumed making plutonium-laden spent fuel by refueling and restarting its nuclear reactor.

In an official statement on the start of the war in March 2003, North Korea noted that the United States had first demanded that Iraq submit to inspections, and it had. The United States next demanded that Baghdad disarm, and it began to do so. The United States then attacked it anyway. "This suggests that even the signing of a non-aggression treaty with the U.S. would not help avert war," a DPRK Foreign Ministry spokesman said on April 6, 2003. "Only military deterrent force, supported by ultra-modern weapons, can avert a war and protect the security of the nation. This is the lesson drawn from the Iraqi war."

Pyongyang's rhetoric and tactics convinced many in Washington that it was determined to arm and should therefore be punished for breaking its commitments. Other policy-makers interpreted its actions as extortion, intended to secure economic aid without giving up anything in return. In fact, it was doing neither, but simply playing tit for tat — cooperating whenever Washington cooperated and retaliating when Washington reneged. It still is.

Hard-liners call this approach blackmail. But that's a misnomer. It's blackmail when a man menaces you with a baseball bat and demands that you hand over your wallet — and you do. It's not blackmail when he hands you his bat and says, let's play ball, and you don't. That's what North Korea did after October 1994 and says it is willing to do again now.

Skeptics may ask why we should believe Pyongyang would be willing to re-engage in the face of implacable hostility from Washington. One answer lies in President Kim Jong Il's October 2001 decision to reform his country's moribund economy, a policy he formally promulgated in July 2002. As a result of that policy shift, the North Korean economy has begun to revive — but reform cannot succeed without a political accommodation with the United States, Japan and South Korea that

facilitates reallocation of resources from military use and attracts aid and investment from the outside.

Misreading the Situation

In the belief that North Korea was on the verge of collapse, however, Bush administration hard-liners kept pushing for an economic embargo and naval blockade to strangle it to death. Yet all the North's neighbors think that regime change can best be achieved through prolonged engagement. They know that attempts to isolate and starve Pyongyang will provoke it to arm even faster, which is why they won't try. Instead, they have pursued talks of their own with North Korea, which persuaded them that it seems willing to deal.

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So why, in contrast, have U.S. policy-makers been so unwilling to countenance negotiating with North Korea before reaching for their guns? For many, it is a blank screen on which to project their own predispositions and prejudices. Given the endemic uncertainty about the DPRK's nuclear capabilities and intentions, the years of hostility and the deep mistrust on both sides, the image of North Korea as a rogue state filled the vacuum of knowledge.

A prudent response to uncertainty would have been to treat estimates of North Korean nuclear capabilities and intentions as rough guesses rather than facts, and to probe Pyongyang's intentions through diplomatic give-and-take without running a high risk of war. The hard-

liners' response, instead, has been to leak worst-case assessments and pursue rash policies — threats of political isolation and economic coercion, even armed force.

By impeding a cooperative solution, the unilateralists have put Washington on a collision course not just with Pyongyang but, more importantly, with America's allies in Asia. This approach threatens to erode political support for the alliance in South Korea and Japan and jeopardize the U.S. troop presence in the region. In fact, the hard-liners would apparently rather pick a fight with China than negotiate with North Korea.

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Their intransigence has been the catalyst for unprecedented cooperation in Northeast Asia aimed at reining in the United States. The January 2003 Japan-Russia summit meeting and the Japan-DPRK summit meetings of 2002 and 2004 should be seen in this light, as should South Korea's warming relations with China. Given the history of antagonism in the region, such cooperation would have seemed unthinkable just a few short years ago.

"Action for Action"

The best way for the United States to avoid further erosion in its position in the region is to negotiate in earnest with North Korea and test whether it makes a deal and lives up to it.

An agreement in principle stating what each side wants at the end is a useful starting point. North Korea needs to agree to rid itself of its nuclear weapons programs and abandon plans to build longer-range missiles. The United States, in turn, should join other nations in providing written security assurances and move to normalize relations as the North eliminates its weapons and the means of making them.

The most urgent need for the United States is to restore inspectors' control over the plutonium that North Korea removed from its reactor at Yongbyon in 1994, and again earlier this year, and to shut down that reactor to keep it from generating more plutonium in its spent fuel. Shutting down and resealing the DPRK's reprocessing plant is another priority.

Satellites and other technical means can monitor a freeze of activity at the Yongbyon reactor and reprocessing plant, though not enrichment sites at unknown locations. Inspections of these sites, as desirable as they are, will take time to arrange. But they can wait: U.S. intelligence estimates the North cannot produce much highly enriched uranium until later in this decade. Conversely, delaying a freeze to negotiate a detailed verifiable agreement on enrichment will simply allow time for Pyongyang to generate more plutonium, fabricate bombs and increase its negotiating leverage.

The key to verification is what the International Atomic Energy Agency calls an "initial declaration," listing all the North's nuclear facilities, equipment and fissile material, in whatever form they may now be. Once that declaration is cross-checked against what U.S. intelligence has already ascertained, elimination can begin. The time for challenge inspections will come, but it is not yet here. Why waste time and bargaining chips negotiating to verify that the North has what it says it has when the aim is to get rid of its weapons programs altogether?

Pyongyang's missile program can be dealt with in parallel. The first priority is what the North offered in Beijing — a ban on missile test launches and exports of missile technology. Next is to negotiate the dismantling of missiles and production sites.

Washington will have to reciprocate for each of these steps, of course. It will not get something for nothing. Words alone will not placate Pyongyang. Given the deep mistrust on both sides, and the belief on each side that the other reneged on the Agreed Framework, this cautious approach makes sense. Each side needs concrete results from the other to enable it to build trust and move forward.

The good news is that Pyongyang seems ready to deal. It says it wants to exchange "words for words" and "action for action." By "words for words" it means an agreement in principle that if Washington "gives up its hostile policy," it will "transparently renounce all nuclear-weapons related programs." By "action for action," it means phased, reciprocal steps. To start, it is offering a freeze on "all the facilities related to nuclear weapons," shutting down its nuclear

reactor and reprocessing plant at Yongbyon. Whether Pyongyang has "facilities" to enrich uranium or is in the process of building them it has yet to clarify. That discussion could begin if Washington engages in direct dialogue with its foe.

Most important, the proposed freeze covers "even products achieved through reprocessing," which meant putting the plutonium acquired in 1994 — five to six bombs' worth — back under inspection. In return, Pyongyang wants Washington to "participate" in providing heavy fuel oil promised under the Agreed Framework, take it off the list of "state sponsors of terrorism" and lift related sanctions. North Korea's negotiating stance is intended to drive home the point that if the United States remains its foe, it feels threatened and will seek nuclear arms to counter that threat. Conversely, if the United States takes steps to end its enmity, it will reciprocate.

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North Korea insists on dealing directly with the United States, whether or not China, South Korea, Japan and Russia are also at the negotiating table, because none of them can provide such assurances on behalf of the United States. Direct dialogue is also the least a state can do to end enmity. To refuse to talk face-to-face is to deny the DPRK's legitimacy as a state.

Testing the Waters

For the past four years the United States has watched North Korea arm without trying what South Korea and Japan think just might get it to stop: negotiating in earnest. Instead, the Bush administration prefers to demonize North Korea as a rogue state and stick with a crime-and-punishment approach to disarming it. This is not surprising, given that most hard-liners are unilateral-

ists who could not care less what allies think. *(As the* Journal *went to press, news came of a tentative agreement at the six-party talks.)*

The Bush administration insists that the six-party talks are succeeding in isolating North Korea and that additional pressure by China and others will bring it to heel. And if not, well, the prospect of a nuclear-armed Pyongyang will at least drive Seoul and Tokyo further into Washington's arms.

The crime-and-punishment approach — unlike reassurances and inducements — has failed to dissuade states from seeking their own nuclear arsenals.

But many Asians see a negotiated resolution as both desirable and possible. Indeed, the Washington hard-liners' uncompromising stance has led some in Seoul and Tokyo to wonder whether they can rely on the U.S. for their security. That suspicion is threatening to unravel U.S. alliances in Northeast Asia and enhance China's influence there. Indeed, far from isolating the North, Washington is itself becoming odd man out in the region, dissipating political support for pressuring Pyongyang and enhancing China's influence.

The great divide in American foreign policy thinking is between those who believe that to get its way in the world the United States has to push other countries around, and those who think that cooperation can sometimes reduce threats to security.

Does Pyongyang mean what it says? The surest way to find out is sustained diplomatic give-and-take. That will require the United States to make a strategic decision to spell out the steps it is prepared to take to end enmity if North Korea eliminates its nuclear weapons programs — and this time carry them out. n