

**The North Korean Nuclear Crisis  
Contingency Planning for the “End Game”**

**By**

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## *Introduction*

Contingency planning is every government's responsibility. Around the world, governments have developed plans to deal with natural disasters – earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanoes and other destructive acts of nature. Such planning enhances government's ability to better provide for the safety and welfare of its citizens. Many governments also plan for man made contingencies, particularly how to deal with situations in the event of war. Planning in peace time to deal with wartime situations affords working level government officials the opportunity and time to develop scenarios and assess the potential consequences of various policy options and actions in the event war actually develops.

Contingency planning must not be confused with policy formulation and decision making. On the contrary, contingency planning actually may narrow the range of preferred policy options that ranking official might recommend to their superiors. In the case of the United States government, these top level officials are referred to as the "principals," the very small number of men and women who directly address the President on foreign and defense policy issues. They include the Secretaries of State and Defense, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Security Adviser. The President and his small circle of advisers determine policy, not the lower ranking officials who engage in contingency planning.

Reviewed here are some of the broad outlines of scenarios and contingency planning conducted during the Clinton Administration specifically regarding the Korean Peninsula. Particular attention is given to the role expected of Japan in the event of hostile military activity between the North Korea and either or both the United States and South Korea.

The Bush Administration has ruled out repeating the Clinton Administration's approach to dealing with North Korea. Ultimately, however, this is simply not possible. Contingency planners in both Administrations must deal with many of the exactly same realities. For them, there can be only two outcomes to North Korea's revived nuclear threat: either a negotiated end to the program or war. Here we focus on the latter, potential outcome.

In this regard, many of the parameters valid during the Clinton Administration remain the same in the Bush Administration. One quarter of the South Korean population live in and around Seoul, which could be reached in two or three days should North Korea launch a blitzkrieg led by hundreds of tanks and backed long range artillery and ballistic missiles. China remains committed to North Korea's defense, in the event that the United States was to launch a first strike against Pyongyang. Russia, however, has ended its long time commitment to defend North Korea. Counter balancing this, however, is the considerable qualitative and quantitative improvement of North Korea's ballistic missile arsenal. Not only can North Korea launch a devastating barrage of conventionally armed ballistic missiles against all points of South Korea, its missiles can also strike U.S. military bases on Japan's Hokkaido and Honshu Islands.

War on the Korean Peninsula today, just as was true one decade ago, would wreck havoc in Northeast Asia, one of the world's most densely populated and dynamic economic regions. These are realities the Bush Administration cannot ignore.

President Bush during his February 2002 visit to South Korea ruled out an American invasion of North Korea. Since North Korea's early October 2002 admission to having initiated a second, clandestine nuclear weapons program, official U.S. government statements have emphasized the pursuit of a "peaceful resolution" to renewed US-North Korea tensions over the latter's nuclear ambitions. But in several public appearances in December 2002, the Secretaries of State and Defense have repeatedly reiterated that the President retains his "military option." Also, the Bush Administration's "New Strategy to Counter Weapons of Mass Destruction" suggests "counter-proliferation," i.e. a first strike using military force, as a viable and primary option.

All the information used in this paper was drawn from the unclassified materials cited in the List of References.

### *North Korea - The Worse Case Scenario*

For at least the past decade, government contingency planners in the U.S., South Korea and Japan have been developing possible scenarios and reactions to them in the event North Korea acquires a nuclear weapons capability. While politicians and diplomats have endeavored to forge and implement agreements designed to deter North Korea from pursuing a nuclear weapons capability, the militaries in Washington, Seoul and Tokyo have focused on preparing for war. Clinton Administration Secretary of Defense William Perry initiated what the Bush Administration essentially continues today: improving the ability of the ROK/US forces to deter and, if required, defeat a North Korea assault on South Korea. Beginning in 1997, Japan agreed to play a considerably enlarged military role in the event that a second Korean War erupts. That role is defined in the US-Japan Revised Defense Cooperation Guidelines agreed to between the United States and Japan in 1997. Those guidelines remain today much as they were first defined in 1996 and 1997.

The United States government in the springs of 1993 and 1994 seriously considered the use of military power to destroy North Korea's program to develop nuclear weapons, something which President Clinton confirmed in remarks to the press in December 2002. President Clinton during a July 1993 visit to South Korea went to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which has separated North and South Korean military forces since the July 27, 1953 signing of the Korean War Armistice. Standing on its southern edge, he was quoted as having said, "When you examine the nature of the American security commitment to Korea, to Japan to this region, it is pointless for them (North Korea) to try to develop nuclear weapons because **if they ever use them it would be the end of their country.**" (Emphasis added, see: *New York Times*, July 12, 1993.)

The President's remarks were intended to deter North Korea from continuing its pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability. His remarks appear to have reflected contingency plans in the event North Korea actually assembled and prepared to use nuclear weapons. The immediate impact, however, was that his statement almost undermined the still fragile US-North Korea negotiations scheduled to begin their second round in Geneva, Switzerland.

At the time I was the Department of States' North Korean affairs officer. My

responsibilities included negotiating with the North Koreans the timing and various arrangements for the negotiations. The night before my departure for Geneva, where I was to set the stage for round two of the nuclear talks, a very concerned DPRK Ambassador to the United Nations Ho Chong informed me via telephone that his government viewed President Clinton's remark as a "threat." This, he insisted, was contrary to pledges Washington and Pyongyang had made to one another only three weeks earlier, on June 11, 1993, in their first ever joint statement. These pledges included the promise not to threaten the use of force against one another. The statement had averted North Korea's withdrawal from the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, and made it possible to continue the negotiations.

Fortunately, North Korea's negotiating team had already departed Pyongyang for Geneva. I convinced my North Korean counterpart in New York that it would be best, given the potentially grave consequences of breaking off the negotiations, to meet in Geneva to discuss Pyongyang's concerns. That night I stayed in the State Department to review press stories and press guidance to prepare for my encounter in Geneva. Two days later, I, Ambassador Ho and a representative designated by North Korea's first deputy foreign minister, Kang Sok-ju, met in a chocolate shop near Lake Geneva. Over hot chocolate, we discussed prospects for war and peace between our two nations and the Korean Peninsula. Ultimately, they agreed to inform Kang Sok-ju that President Clinton's intention was not to threaten North Korea, but to point to the possible "contingency" of what could happen if Pyongyang threatened the United States and its allies with nuclear weapons. During this second round, Pyongyang proposed that Washington supply it with two modern light water nuclear reactor in exchange for the "freezing" of North Korea's nuclear program.

A serious impasse, however, had developed by March 1994. Contingency planners in Washington were busy developing scenarios and possible responses in the event North Korea refused to halt its nuclear program. The so-called "military option" was never completely ruled out, but it was at the bottom of the preferred options. Just like today, concern focused on the potential damage to Seoul in the event hostilities erupted on the Korean Peninsula. Chairman of the joint chiefs of Staff General John Shalikashvili was quoted in the *Washington Post* on December 12, 1993, as having said, "I just can't answer whether we could stop them (the North Korea army) before they get to Seoul or not." Geography is slow to change. Today, just as was true one decade ago, the distance between the DMZ and Seoul is twenty five miles, a distance equal to that between downtown Tokyo's Nihonbashi to Hachijioji, or from the Department of State to Dulles International Airport.

As prospects for a negotiated settlement seemed to wane in the spring of 1994, the United States initiated preparations for possible war on the Korean Peninsula. Two batteries of Patriot anti-aircraft missile, which proved able to knock down Iraqi ballistic missiles during the Gulf War, long range multiple launched rocket systems or MLRS artillery, "smart" or laser guided bombs, repair parts, and Apache attack, anti-tank helicopters plus additional headquarters and intelligence contingents were dispatched to South Korea in April and May 1994.

During the previous Bush and Clinton Administrations, Defense Department contingency regarding armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula focused on countering a full scale North Korean invasion of South Korea, bombing North Korea's nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, and enforcing a

United Nation's imposed embargo on North Korea. Beginning in 1996, planners turned to the possibility of dealing with the collapse of the North Korean regime in the wake of a coup or a popular uprising. Also beginning in 1996, the United States initiated discussions with Japan to enlarge its role in the event of a second Korean War. Both the former Bush and Clinton Administrations focused on the use of conventional weapons. The option to use nuclear weapons was significantly retained, and made the least preferred and available for consideration only if North Korea threatened to use nuclear weapons. The Bush Administration continues to rely on many of these contingency plans. Less clear that the Clinton Administration, however, is the Bush Administration's contingency plans regarding the possible use of nuclear weapons.

### ***Conventional Armed Confrontation***

As a last ditch effort to deter North Korea from refueling its 5 megawatt reactor at Yongbyon Nuclear Research Center, Washington announced it would seek United Nations sponsored economic sanctions against North Korea. Pyongyang responded that declaring that it would consider such sanctions "an act of war."

Washington's contingency planners outlined a set of possible North Korean steps short of, but eventually leading to war. It was believed North Korea could:

- continue to develop its nuclear weapons capability,
- challenge at sea any use of naval vessels the U.S. and its allies might post near North Korean ports to enforce a complete economic embargo,
- dispatch terrorists and special agents to South Korea, Japan and possibly elsewhere to commit acts of violence to terrorize the populations and to disrupt economic activity,
- initiate provocative military activities in the DMZ,
- initiate secret preparations for a surprise attack on South Korea and Japan using ballistic missiles, long range artillery and an armored led offensive designed to encircle Seoul and compel its government to negotiate with Pyongyang.

This scenario, developed during the Clinton Administration, very likely remains essentially the same in the Bush Administration. Similarly, the range of possible responses has not undergone fundamental alteration.

### ***Conventional Response – Surgical Air Strike***

For a short time in the spring of 1993, and again in 1994, contingency planning focused on a "pre-emptive strike option." Consideration was given to using aircraft and missiles to destroy the Yongbyon nuclear facilities. These included the 5 megawatt reactor, spent fuel building where 8,000 spent nuclear fuel rods are stored and, if reprocessed, could yield sufficient plutonium for several nuclear weapons, plus the reprocessing facility located about one kilometer from the spent fuel storage building. Conducting the strike using conventionally armed Tomahawk missiles launched from an attack submarine positioned in the Yellow Sea would have been relatively easy. Also, America's arsenal of so-called "smart bombs" would have facilitated pin point accuracy during an air strike by either carrier or land based F-15 and F-16 jet fighters. Concerned about this possible "contingency," North Korea began reinforcing its defenses at

Yongbyon by increasing the number of SAM or surface to air anti-aircraft missile batteries positions on top of the surrounding hills.

The attack's consequences, however, would have been counterproductive. North Korea could have seized on the attack to launch a full scale invasion of South Korea. At the same time Pyongyang could have turned to Beijing to activate their mutual defense treaty which obligates China to defend North Korea in the event of an attack by a foreign nation. Then too, bombing the 5 megawatt reactor would have released a large volume of highly radioactive material into the atmosphere. Prevailing wind patterns would have spread this deadly dust over either the highly populated southern half of the Korean Peninsula, or over Japan's Hokkaido Island, and eventually even North America.

Fortunately for all concerned parties, this contingency plan never emerged as a viable option during the Clinton Administration.

**Full Scale Invasion:** Contingency planners in the spring of 1994 were primarily concerned with how to deal with a possible large scale North Korean invasion of South Korea. Any one of the early phase hostile steps, be they armed confrontation at sea or acts of terror in South Korea, would have caused the situation to escalate quickly to full scale war. In the spring of 1994, then Commander in chief of U.S. Forces and the Combined ROK/US Forces Command was quoted in the *New York Times* on February 6, 1994, as having said,

Our operational plan in the event of North Korean attack is to stop the enemy short of Seoul and quickly to take the offensive into North Korea, destroy its armed forces, and seize Pyongyang and the nuclear facilities in that vicinity. We aim to gain air superiority within hours of a North Korean attack and air supremacy within a day and a half.

Secretary of Defense Perry reassured the American and South Korean public during a March 28, 1994 appearance on the McNeil-Lehrer News Hour by stating, "Let me state very directly and very emphatically. There is no danger of a military confrontation (in Korea) anywhere in the near future ... There is ... no military danger in North Korea (for) many weeks (or a) few months ..." He continued, "we are ... taking the prudent steps ... to prepare ourselves in the event that the North Koreans take some action we're not expecting to happen but we simply have to be prepared for." Nevertheless, contingency planning for possible armed conflict on the Korean Peninsula continued, as did reinforcement of U.S. Forces in South Korea.

### ***Nuclear Response Contingency***

The former Bush and Clinton Administrations had taken steps to reduce the risk of nuclear warfare in light of the Soviet Union's collapse. Former President Bush in September 1991 in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly pledged that the United States would return all its tactical nuclear weapons to the United States. This left the still very potent arsenal of nuclear weapons aboard America's mighty fleet of nuclear submarines. Nevertheless, the initiative authorized the removal of all nuclear weapons from South Korea, something South Korean

President Roh Dae-woo confirmed in January 1992. Complementing this move was the United States pledge not to launch a first nuclear strike against non-nuclear parties to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. President Clinton continued both policies. He also extended this policy to include North Korea as indicated in the June 11, 1993 US-DPRK Joint Statement.

The current Bush Administration's policy regarding nuclear weapons is less clear. The Administration's unclassified version of its "National Strategy to Combat Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD)," made public on December 16, 2002, sets forth strident "rules of engagement" regarding nations that possess weapons of mass destruction and/or affiliate themselves with terrorists. This group of nations, which President Bush labeled an "axis of evil" in this January 2002 State of the Union speech before the U.S. congress, includes North Korea. The Bush Administration points to "counter proliferation" as the cornerstone of its strategy to combat WMD, and declares that,

We will ensure that all needed capabilities to combat WMD are fully integrated into the emerging defense transformation plan and into our homeland security posture. Counter proliferation will also be fully integrated into the basic doctrine, training and equipping of all forces, in order to ensure that they can sustain operations to decisively defeat WMD-armed adversaries.

Yet to be clarified publicly is the extent to which the Bush Administration's new counter proliferation strategy alters previous Administrations' guidelines regarding the use of nuclear weapons. The Clinton Administration early in its nuclear talks with North Korea ruled out the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea, but only so long as North Korea remained a party to the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons.

The issue is crucial given China's continuing commitment to respond promptly and militarily to an attack on North Korea. In other words, if a sustained armed confrontation occurred between the United States and North Korea, hostilities could quickly escalate from war between the United States and North Korea to one that also involved China on North Korea's side. That war would begin with conventional, non-nuclear weapons, but might, depending on how the Bush Administration chooses to implement its new counter-proliferation strategy, and the extent to which China decides to respond. Bush Administration Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld's December 22, 2002 remark that the United States could deal militarily and decisively with wars against both Iraq and North Korea makes even more pertinent the need to clarify whether the Bush Administration has moved away from previous Administration's restraints on the use of nuclear weapons.

### ***Regime collapse:***

In 1996, the Department of Defense expanded its contingency planning to include collapse of the Kim Jong Il regime. An unidentified "senior" Defense Department official, in an interview with *Far Eastern Economic Review* correspondent Nigel Holloway in June 1997, confirmed that deterring a North Korean attack on South Korea remained a priority concern. Additionally, the official continued,

... we're also preparing to handle a humanitarian crisis and everything in between. Today we're at the beginning stages of "contingency" planning, mostly on a bilateral basis (with South Korea). But we're also talking candidly on a trilateral basis to expose the Japanese leadership to what may happen.

Regarding scenarios, the Pentagon official answered,

One would be an action or revolt from the top, a military coup or an assassination of Kim Jong Il or with Kim Jong Il going into self-exile. Or there could be a military revolt that pits two parts of the (North Korean) armed forces against each other. Or something that would be more organized into a civil war. The other possible scenario is chaos or upheaval from the bottom, say a local rebellion that would spread to the rest of the country. I tend towards thinking that it could be something at the top – an assassination of Kim Jong Il or a coup. It seems that at some point somebody on the inside has seen enough of what's happening to say, "We're all doomed."

At the time in 1997, thinking along these lines was fairly new in Washington. Until then, most U.S. government officials saw North Korea as a monolithic, rigid pyramid topped by a single, almighty despot and resolutely defended by an army of one million loyal and highly motivated soldiers. Floods in 1995, followed by pervasive starvation and economic decline in North Korea suggested the possibility that the regime might crumble as had happened a few years earlier in Eastern Europe. Also in 1996, the South Korean government, using bags of U.S. cash and promises of much more, managed to corrupt elements of North Korea's Korean Workers' Party and even some staff on a military headquarters on North Korea's east coast.

Hopes that the Kim Jong Il regime might crumble from within proved premature, at least during the Clinton Administration. President Bush's repeated expressions of dislike for North Korean leader Kim Jong Il suggest contingency planning for ways to topple the regime would again be an acceptable item on the Pentagon's contingency planning agenda. Further strengthening this possibility were the comments that an unidentified, ranking Pentagon official made to a journalists in November, 2002. The official is quoted in the interview with *Yomiuri Daily* as having declared, "... I think we need to stop thinking about what we're going to give (North Korea to halt its nuclear program). Instead, we need to think about how we're going to change this regime. How are we going to bring this government down? That's the threat, the government." The official concluded, "Yes, That's what our President (Bush) thinks. Our diplomats are uneasy with it but that's what our President thinks. He's very clear on that."

In July 1997, the North Korean military reaction to the Pentagon's contingency planning for the possible collapse or overthrowing of the Kim Jong Il regime was prompt and harsh. I learned the reaction first hand because I was in Pyongyang at the time as the State Department liaison officer assigned to the U.S. Army Joint Recovery Team that then was seeking to locate and return to the United States the remains of Korean War American dead. The unidentified Pentagon official's remarks seriously agitated the North Korea military officials with whom I met daily.

Unknown to the public at that time, South Korea in 1995 and 1996 had managed to corrupt several high ranking North Korean military and communist party officials with the hope of promoting the collapse or overthrow of the North Korean regime. North Korean internal security officials, however, by the summer of 1997 had identified and executed this small circle of corrupted officials. The South Korean government effort had back fired. It enabled the regime to discredit critics as agents of the “South Korean puppet regime” and the “American imperialists.” Also, the Pentagon official’s unguarded remarks suggested to some in Pyongyang that the United State probably was behind the effort to foster an anti-Kim Jong Il coup. For one year afterward, Kim Jong Il purged the ranks of his party and army, and insisted upon rigid adherence to his father’s interpretation of Marxism-Leninism, i.e. *Juje*. Ultimately, the Kim Jong Il regime emerged stronger because of restored confidence in its ability to root out dissent.

### ***Japan’s Role in Contingency Plans***

On September 24, 1997, the United States and Japan initialed the Revised Defense Cooperation Guidelines. Ever since, these guidelines have served as the basic outline for each nation’s role in responding to “regional contingencies,” i.e. armed conflict in Northeast Asia, particularly on the Korean Peninsula. The guidelines address three situations:

1. Cooperation under normal circumstance,
2. Actions in response to an armed attack against Japan, and
3. Cooperation in situations in areas surrounding Japan that will have an important influence on Japan’s peace and security (situations in areas surrounding Japan, i.e. the Korean Peninsula.)

Japan’s Self Defense Forces (JDSF) would not become directly involved in combat operations outside Japanese territory. The revised guidelines do significantly expand the types of non-lethal supplies and logistical support by complementing United States military airlift and other logistical capabilities. Also, JSDF would be called upon to compliment US resources needed to address humanitarian contingencies such as the evacuation of non-combatants from the Korean Peninsula and the rescue and supply of relief to refugees.

On September 24, 1998, Japan signed a memorandum of understanding that pledged Japan’s participation in the joint development with the United States of a Theater Missile Defense (TMD) capability to defend Japan and US forces in Northeast Asia from a ballistic missile threat. The signing followed North Korea’s August 1998 launching of a three stage *Taepodong* ballistic missile through Hokkaido’s air space. The two nations then set about developing a variant of the Aegis anti-missile system for use by the Japan Naval Self-Defense Force.

Specifics on how the two nations would implement these expanded guidelines appeared in the in the November 1997 issue of the Japanese news magazine, *This is Yomiuri*, in an article by Akira Ogawa, a researcher at the Okazaki Institute. For two years, the Okazaki Institute had worked closely with the Pacific Forum CSIS, a Honolulu based think tank, to develop contingency plans for possible implementation of the revised US-Japan Defense Guidelines. Participating in this working group were James Kelly, the bush Administration’s Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Michael Green, now National Security Council Foreign Policy adviser on

East Asian Affairs, and Torkel Patterson, now a special adviser to the U.S. Ambassador to Japan.

Mr. Ogawa's article spells out in detail how the United States and Japan would respond jointly to a "fictitious" second Korean War. According to the scenario, renewed nuclear activity in North Korea would set the stage for a United Nations sanctioned "economic blockage" of North Korea.

U.S. and Japanese naval vessels would be deployed along North Korea's coasts to enforce the blockage. Japanese SDF escort ships and minesweepers would be stationed at Yokosuka and Sasebo US Naval bases to prevent North Korean submarines from positioning mines in their entrances. Using Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) aircraft and P3C anti-submarine patrol aircraft, the two nations would monitor the sea lanes in the Sea of Japan and Tsushima Straits. They would increase their collection and exchange of intelligence, and link their military communications networks. Japanese air and sea rescue teams would coordinate their activities with US Forces Japan to assist with the rescue of pilots and sailors, and possibly any non-combatants seeking to evacuate from South Korea or refugees fleeing North Korea.

Japan's largest contribution would be in the area of logistical support. US military aircraft and ships would be given access to all of Japan's civilian airports and sea ports to unload and to move supplies. At the same time, the Japanese government would begin providing U.S. forces in Japan with everything such as petroleum fuel, oil, lubricants, etc, except weapons and ammunition. The number of Japanese employed at US military bases would increase significantly. To defend against possible terrorist attacks at US bases in Japan, the Japanese government would assume primary responsibility for the bases' security.

Japan's role would expand further if North Korea responded militarily to an economic embargo. Japan's Self Defense Forces would assume many of the defense missions US Forces Japan routinely performs in and around Japan's home islands, releasing US military assets for deployment to North Korea. US Marines in Okinawa would perform an amphibious landing on North Korea's eastern coast. The US aircraft carrier battle group, accompanied by Aegis equipped cruisers and destroyers, would depart its home port of Yokosuka to assume its combat station in the Sea of Japan near North Korea. US F-16's would depart Misawa Air Force Base for action over North Korea. Meanwhile, US and Japanese batteries of Patriot missiles would be activated to defend against possible attack by North Korean Nodong ballistic missiles.

Ultimately, Pentagon contingency plans estimate the combined forces of the United States and Republic of Korea could defeat a North Korea invasion of the south within 72 hours. During these three days, US B-52 bombers based in Guam would concentrate on destroying North Korea's ballistic missile sites and the concentration of long range artillery north of Seoul. Batteries of Patriot missiles would defend against North Korean Scud and Nodong ballistic missiles. US and South Korean Apache attack helicopters and F-16 fighter-bombers would destroy North Korean tanks and bunkers along the DMZ. Once North Korea's initial offensive had been contained, South Korean and US Army ground forces would counter attack across the DMZ. Simultaneously, US marines would land on North Korea's east coast. The two offenses would converge on Pyongyang. Japan's Self Defense Forces would not become directly involved in the military action on the Korean

Peninsula. However, its naval forces might have to engage North Korean submarines and or patrol boats near the Japanese home island, North Korean agents might commit acts of terror within Japan and North Korean ballistic missiles might be launched toward targets in Hokkaido and northern Honshu Islands.

Uncertain, however, is how China would react to such a contingency.

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