

# Austin American-Statesman

Saturday, February 19, 2005

Nicholas Evan Sarantakes LOCAL CONTRIBUTOR

## With two Koreas, there can be no peace

North Korea's chilling announcement that it has nuclear weapons has again pushed that Northeast Asian country to the forefront of U.S. foreign policy. It is no distortion to call the government in Pyongyang a rogue regime that poses a danger to both the United States and its allies. In fact, North Korea poses one of the gravest problems in world affairs.

The biggest concern to most is North Korea's apparently successful effort to develop nuclear weapons — a disturbing development, to put it mildly. We have every reason to suspect that this regime — which is strapped of hard currency and cannot feed its own people without foreign help — would make its weapons technology available on the global arms market. The consequences of such nuclear proliferation could be catastrophic.

But last week's ominous developments are only the latest in 50 years of dangerous volatility on the Korean peninsula. More than 400 Americans have come home in body bags after small-unit infantry engagements with the North Korean Army in the demilitarized zone that separates the two Koreas. Pyongyang has also used terrorism and assassination to advance its interests.

But as serious as the problem of a nuclear North Korea is, it is only a symptom of a larger political problem: the peninsula's artificial division. Americans need to remember that the north and south are part of a single Korea nation that has long shared a history, culture and identity. The country fell to Japanese imperialism in the opening years of the 20th century. When the Japanese empire collapsed in 1945, the natural question was: who will replace the Japanese?

A number of Koreans struggled to fill the void. Eventually two regimes developed in this one country, with both claiming to be the only legitimate,

sovereign expression of Korean nationalism. Neither was willing to compromise, and the Korean War was essentially an effort by these two power centers to impose themselves on the other half. Neither did.

Since the war, the Republic of Korea in the south has become a major industrial power and a legitimate, multi-party democracy. History has been much less kind to the impoverished and diplomatically isolated Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north.

Despite such dire straits, the leaders in Pyongyang refuse to give up or sell out their claim to South Korea. These people are not idiots. They know that they are in trouble and that their regime must first survive before it can achieve unification.

Developing nuclear weapons is a way to blackmail the United States, which to North Korea is the real power behind the south's "puppet regime." The North Koreans believe direct and indirect American admissions of their legitimacy will undermine South Korea's legitimacy. This blackmail also allows Pyongyang to provide for its immediate needs without having to take charity from the international community.

Diplomatic negotiations on nuclear proliferation sound like a reasonable idea. But they ignore the fact that this approach has been tried and that the North Koreans have shown no willingness to honor previous agreements. Such efforts are doomed. The nuclear issue is nothing more than a byproduct of a divided Korea, and disarmament talks address nothing more than a symptom of the underlying problem.

"Regime change" is not a solution either. Rather, "state liquidation" in the form of national unification is the only long-term solution. The U.S. goal should be to compel the leaders of North Korea to go — hopefully gently — into the good night like their communist brethren in East Germany.

This is, of course, an extremely difficult proposition. There are two schools of thought on how to achieve it. One holds that South Korea and the United States should hang tough and isolate the north, undermining its economy and its contact with the outside world. Others argue that efforts should be made to engage North Korea, with the idea that greater trade and contact will plant the seeds of dissent and make the regime dissolve.

The problem is that both approaches have been tried and neither has proven all that successful. The isolate them approach only bolsters the communist philosophy of *juche*, or "self-reliance." As for engagement, Pyongyang has over the last 30 years been more than willing to make gestures at international cooperation, but these have amounted to nothing more than publicity stunts.

U.S. and South Korean policy-makers need to adopt a combined approach. Pressure China, the North's last major trading partner, to reduce its commercial ties to North Korea. Supply humanitarian assistance but attach many strings, like having foreign observers make sure these supplies get into the hands of the average North Korean and that it is presented as international charity rather than the product of clever foreign policy. Encourage refugees to seek asylum in the south on a massive scale, either by going through China or with short boat trips that circumvent the highly militarized dividing line between the two Koreas.

But the most important U.S. foreign policy objective must be the unification of Korea, not as some vague idea, but as a concrete goal. Then, and only then, will that nation know peace.

Sarantakes, a native of Austin, is a visiting associate professor of strategy at the U.S. Air War College. The views he expresses here do not reflect any official position of the U.S. Air Force or the Department of Defense.