

Friday, February 11, 2005

Korean nightmares

Francis Porretto asks about our opinions on how to respond to North Korean nuclear activity, now that Pyongyang has said publicly that they already have nuclear weapons.

But let's not buy into the North Korean claim without some cogitation. Is it true? Have we the means to verify or falsify it?

Washington hasn't said much. CIA figures have occasionally made statements to the effect that Pyongyang's possession of nukes appears likely, but if verifiable data were available, we'd probably have heard much more.

I don't necessarily agree that "we'd probably have heard much more" if Washington knew for sure that DPRK had functioning nukes...even without trying very hard, I can think of a handful of compellingly good reasons for the US Government to try and keep a lid on the knowledge of how much they know for sure about the situation over there. In the kind of diplomatic and strategic minefield they're facing with Korea, they'd be stupid not to want to play their cards close to the vest.

But either way, North Korea does indeed figure prominently in most of the real nightmare scenarios in current geopolitics. If we can keep China from intervening militarily there's a reasonable hope of getting through this without the kind of mind-numbing carnage that would follow from deployment of strategic nuclear weapons. But, short of violent overthrow of the Kim regime from the inside, it doesn't look like there's any way through that doesn't involve a lot of bloodshed.

As for what I'd want to do if we (and our allies in the region count as part of "we" here) were attacked...well, the same as in any other military situation: the absolute minimum required to reliably accomplish the objective. If a tactical strike followed by an invasion seemed likely to work, then that would be the best way (to not merely prevent unnecessary civilian casualties, but avoid collateral damage to the South that would result from a larger strike...not to mention salvage our only chance to avoid becoming the world's pariah).

But if Kim sells nukes to terrorists or uses them against one of our regional allies and the only effective response option we have is to turn DPRK into glass...well, glass it must be, and may God have mercy on our souls.

It's a whole new world out there. Cold War deterrence worked because, while our enemies may have been evil, they had comprehensible motives that could be exploited to our advantage. But the Islamist terrorists are literally suicidal, and the Kims are insane...and we have yet to find a way to deter either. It may not be possible.

We're a big country. Unlike most of our allies, we could survive the loss of one or two of our largest cities. But we could never survive a failure to retaliate against a nuclear attack. The question would then become, could we survive the guilt if we did retaliate?

Posted by Matt at 01:25