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Fighting a two front Nonproliferation Battle

The continued effort to address North Korea's nuclear weapon program have yielded only slow and incremental progress over the past few years. Moreover, new developments around the world, including growing concern over Iran's nuclear activities, make it even less likely that multilateral efforts to end Pyongyang's nuclear program will be successful. With few real, and no good, military options to end either Iran or North Korea's nuclear efforts, the United States may be forced to accept what a few years ago would have been unthinkable: Iran and North Korea as nuclear weapon states. This turn of events would be a disaster for US security and global efforts to hold back the acquisition of nuclear weapons by even more states in the Middle East and East Asia.

How did things get so bad? One factor is the Bush administration's decision to go to war in Iraq when and how it did. These decisions have directly affected the ability of the United States to address the dual nuclear challenges of Iran and North Korea. Neither country's nuclear program are a result of Bush administration policies, and the Bush administration has directly confronted the nuclear programs in both countries. But the military commitment required in Iraq has severely strained US capabilities in other scenarios, and damaged allied confidence that the US will wisely consider when and how to use its vast military superiority. This in turn has made several key states reluctant to move issues to the UN Security Council or otherwise lend support to potential US decisions to resort to military force. This limits the ability of the US to orchestrate real pressure against either country. The fact that all of this is taking place during an election year when the President is squarely focused on re-election doesn't help either.

Yet, in response to these realities, the Bush administration has not sufficiently energized its other remaining, and potentially successful tools, including first and foremost diplomacy. If these issues are so important to US security, where is the intensity of effort from the President many might expect? Why is the Secretary of State not shuttling between Seoul, Tokyo and Beijing to negotiate new proposals for Pyongyang and to ensure a common approach to a common problem? Why is the President not on the phone full time to the capitols of the Middle East and Europe to ensure that other countries understand the deep threat posed by Tehrans attempts to acquire the means to produce nuclear weapons? Career diplomats and dedicated government employees and diplomats are doing their part, but only if these issues get the presidential attention they deserve is there any chance of averting what all agree is an unacceptable outcome.

The only viable options are for close coordination and cooperation between the United States and its allies in both regions and in Europe. These alliances must make clear to both North Korean and Iranian leaders that their nuclear programs will not be tolerated, but that their elimination will bring tangible benefits to both states. This requires a delicate balance, since any chance of turning these programs off requires both benefits for cooperation and real consequences for continued nuclear pursuit. This will entail risks, but preventing the spread of nuclear weapons would appear worth almost any such danger.

If President Bush is unwilling or unable to undertake such an effort, then it is understandable that countries neighboring North Korea and Iran should begin to increasingly take security matters into their own hands. South Korean and Japanese leaders have discussed possible assistance for North Korea and could resume bilateral efforts to engage Pyongyang if the six party talks fail to produce results anytime soon. Likewise, countries in the Middle East will begin to reconsider their relationships with the United States and Iran, and may begin to rely on new approaches to their own security. In the extreme cases, countries in both regions may begin to reconsider their own nuclear options.

In the past, the very mention that countries like Japan or Egypt, Saudi Arabia or Taiwan might go nuclear brought angry responses from many experts, but it is quickly becoming time to look at the future and consider the likely outcomes. At the very least, regional nuclear arms races in East Asia and the Middle East should spur the Bush administration to pursue all possible solutions to end the nuclear aspirations in both countries. Failure to act now could result in a future none of the countries in the region, or the United States, should look forward to.