



What Will Stop North Korea

(Published in *The Washington Post*, October 13, 2006)

[Charles Krauthammer](#)

Colaboraciones n° 1296

October 25, 2006

It shall be the policy of this nation to regard any nuclear missile launched from Cuba against any nation in the Western Hemisphere as an attack by the Soviet Union on the United States, requiring a full retaliatory response upon the Soviet Union .

President John F. Kennedy,
Oct. 22, 1962

Now *that's* deterrence.

Kennedy was pledging that if any nuke was launched from Cuba, the United States would not even bother with Cuba but would go directly to the source and bring the apocalypse to Russia with a massive nuclear attack.

The remarkable thing about this kind of threat is that in 1962 it was very credible. Indeed, its credibility kept the peace throughout a half-

century of the Cold War.

Deterrence is what you do when there is no way to disarm your enemy. You cannot deprive him of his weapons, but you can keep him from using them. We long ago reached that stage with North Korea.

Everyone has tried to figure out how to disarm North Korea. It will not happen. Kim Jong Il is not going to give up his nukes. The only way to disarm the regime is to destroy it. China could do that with sanctions but will not. The United States could do that with a second Korean War but will not either.

So we are back to deterrence. Hence the familiar echoes of the Cuban missile crisis with North Korea's rude entry into the nuclear club this

week. The United States had to immediately put down markers for deterrence. President Bush put down two.

One marker, preventing a direct attack on our allies in the region, was straightforward, if bland: "I reaffirmed to our allies in the region, including South Korea and Japan," the president said in a nationally televised statement, "that the United States will meet the full range of our deterrent and security commitments." It is understood by all that the decades-old American nuclear umbrella in the Pacific Rim commits us to attacking North Korea -- presumably with in-kind nuclear retaliation -- were it to attack our allies first.

Gruesome stuff, but run-of-the-mill in the nuclear age. The hard part is the second marker Bush tried to put down: proliferation deterrence.

We are in an era far more complicated than Kennedy's because his great crisis occurred before the age of terrorism. The world of 1962 was still technologically and ideologically primitive: Miniaturized nuclear weaponry had not yet been invented, nor had modern international terrorism. Yasser Arafat and the Palestine Liberation Organization gave the world that gift half a decade later with their perfection of the political airline hijacking.

Terrorism has since grown in popularity, ambition and menace. Its practitioners are in the market for nuclear weapons. North Korea has little else to sell.

Hence Bush's attempt to codify a second form of deterrence: "The transfer of nuclear weapons or material by North Korea to states or non-state entities would be considered a grave threat to the United States, and we would hold North Korea fully accountable for the consequences of such action."

A good first draft, but it could use some Kennedyesque clarity. The phrase "fully accountable" does not exactly instill fear, as it has been used promiscuously by several administrations in warnings to both terrorists and rogue states -- after which we did absolutely nothing. A better formulation would be the following:

Given the fact that there is no other nuclear power so recklessly in violation of its nuclear obligations, it shall be the policy of this nation to regard any detonation of a nuclear explosive on the United States or its allies as an attack by North Korea on the United States requiring a full retaliatory response upon North Korea.

This is how you keep Kim Jong Il from proliferating. Make him understand that his survival would be hostage to the actions of whatever terrorist group he sold his weapons to. Any terrorist detonation would be assumed to have his address on it. The United States would then return postage. Automaticity of this kind concentrates the mind.

This policy has a hitch, however. It works only in a world where there is but a single rogue nuclear state. Once that club expands to two, the policy evaporates, because a nuclear

terror attack would no longer have a single automatic return address.

Which is another reason why keeping Iran from going nuclear is so important. With North Korea there

is no going back. But Iran is not there yet. One rogue country is tolerable because it can be held accountable. Two rogue countries guarantees undeterrable and therefore inevitable nuclear terrorism.