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The Times

October 10, 2006

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Wanted: new deterrent for a tyrant who lets people starve

WORLD BRIEFING BY BRONWEN MADDOX

NOTHING has worked so far in deterring North Korea from building a nuclear bomb and testing it. None of the options now for responding to the test offers much hope. The best lie in pressure from China and, just possibly, in the offer of talks from the US. But dealing with such an ugly regime as Pyongyang would be repellent — and might fail.

The crisis has been building for 13 years, since North Korea announced that it would pull out of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty — and so could use fissile material from its reactors in a weapons programme. Under the "framework agreement" brokered by the Clinton Administration, North Korea froze most parts of its weapons research in return for supplies of fuel oil. The US lifted some sanctions in place since the 1950-53 Korean War.

Clinton aides still maintain that this worked, and up to a point it did. But it froze only the plutonium-based research, and left North Korea half-free to pursue a uranium-based route.

In any case, in 2001 the Bush Administration wanted no part of a policy so much identified with President Clinton, and which it thought too wishy-washy. It refused to deal with Pyongyang other than through the six-party talks. Last year it slapped financial sanctions on North Korean businesses operated through Macau, now part of China.

That has provoked only more belligerence from North Korea. But nor has South Korea's "sunshine policy" of engagement worked. Like China, it justified supplying North Korea with aid and fuel by saying

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that talking to Pyongyang was better than confrontation. Neither China nor South Korea has wanted to back North Korea into a corner, which could trigger military conflict.

Given this recent discouraging history, what now? No option is very attractive.

CUTTING OFF AID

China has already severely cut aid to North Korea; South Korea has frozen it since the July missile tests. But the world knows that the Pyongyang regime does not care about its people dying if its own grip on power is not threatened.

SANCTIONS

US firms do little business with North Korea. So the greatest pressure would have to come from its neighbours, particularly China.

But the US may try to tighten a UN resolution adopted after the July missile tests, which would press governments to stop banks and companies helping North Korea's weapons programme, and make sure that all North Korean cargo was closely examined at its destination. The US is also likely to bar goods originally made in North Korea's Kaesong industrial zone from a free-trade pact it is now writing with South Korea.

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HAVE YOUR SAY

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I believe they are capable of building a nuclear system, and China plays an important role to stop them. ppl has nothing to eat there, what they are trying to prove? despite all the economy faluor, they still has the power and the world should not underestimate them.

Chih, London,

Eventually sanctions may work, after a long period of time more than likely. China should jump at the chance of putting the screws on North Korea to gain even more of a dominant position in the world. As for having the Bomb itself, who can blame N. Korea. As the dear leader said, it makes the US think twice about bombing his country. Same goes for Iran. For these countries having the Bomb makes defensive sense: it is the perfect deterrent against an aggressor like the USA. Relatively cheap and massively destructive.

Mike, Bonn, Germany

i'm concerned that any further sanctions will cause undue hardship on the korean people. i'm also scared

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