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Trends. On Rewarding Blackmail and Brinkmanship in North Korea

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses North Korean use of blackmail and brinkmanship in its relationship with other countries, comparing that to the United States' use of "carrots and sticks" in its dealings with Iraq.

Although there is significant regional support--e.g., among Japan, South Korea, China, and Russia--for bilateral talks between North Korea and the United States Government (USG) concerning the North Korea's nuclear weapons-related activities, the USG position supports multilateral talks. To the USG, the very implementation of bilateral talks would reward North Korea for engaging in activities that might lead to an increase in nuclear weapons capability. In essence, the USG would construe itself and could be construed by others to be rewarding black mail and brinkmanship.

However, if bilateral talks would, indeed, lead to the prevention or slowing down of further nuclear weapons development, then USG insisting on multilateral talks would be detrimental to USG interests. If insisting on multilateral talks is detrimental to USG interests, North Korea would be rewarded for its recent nuclear weapons-related activities. In this latter case, North Korea would be rewarded by engaging in activities leading to an adversary taking action not in that adversary's best interests. Moreover, since the notion of bilateral talks within a multilateral infrastructure has already been broached by the USG, the validity of the reward distinction stemming from bilateral versus multilateral talks seems tenuous at best.

Also, if North Korea's threatening to ramp up nuclear weapons development--unless there would be suitable USG recognition of North Korean sovereignty, a formal promise not to attack North Korea, and provision of significant economic aid--is blackmail and brinkmanship, what would one call the USG threat of war against Iraq unless the latter gives up its weapons of mass destruction, documentation about relevant weapons and precursors destroyed, and changes its regime? In this case, of course, neither bilateral nor multilateral talks seem to be on the table. The bottom line is that seeking to employ carrots and sticks among political actors--contingently and non-contingently, cooperatively and competitively--is the very essence of politics. (See Dao, J. (March 6, 2003). Criticism of Bush's policy on Korea sharpens. *The New York Times*, p. A16; Moessinger, P. (1977). Developmental study of exchange and blackmailing. *Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 131, 255-259; Rapoport, A., & Chammah, A.M. (1966). The game of chicken. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 10, 10-14; 23-28; Vatz, R. E., & Weinberg, L. S. (1977). A Szaszian view of death, or the myth of death. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 17, 71-73.)