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HEADLINE: Games Nations Play

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BODY:

What game does the Bush administration think it's playing in Korea?

That's not a rhetorical question. During the cold war, the U.S. government employed experts in game theory to analyze strategies of nuclear deterrence. Men with Ph.D.'s in economics, like Daniel Ellsberg, wrote background papers with titles like "The Theory and Practice of Blackmail." The intellectual quality of these analyses was impressive, but their main conclusion was simple: Deterrence requires a credible commitment to punish bad behavior and reward good behavior.

I know, it sounds obvious. Yet the Bush administration's Korea policy has systematically violated that simple principle. Let's be clear: North Korea's rulers are as nasty as they come. But unless we have a plan to overthrow those rulers, we should ask ourselves what incentives we're giving them.

So put yourself in Kim Jong Il's shoes. The Bush administration has denounced you. It broke off negotiations as soon as it came into office. Last year, though you were no nastier than you had been the year before, George W. Bush declared you part of the "axis of evil." A few months later Mr. Bush called you a "pygmy," saying: "I loathe Kim Jong Il -- I've got a visceral reaction to this guy. . . . They tell me, well we may not need to move too fast, because the financial burdens on people will be so immense if this guy were to topple -- I just don't buy that."

Moreover, there's every reason to take Mr. Bush's viscera seriously. Under his doctrine of pre-emption, the U.S. can attack countries it thinks might support terrorism, whether or not they have actually done so. And who decides whether we attack? Here's what Mr. Bush says: "You said we're headed to war in Iraq. I don't know why you say that. I'm the person who gets to decide, not you." L'etat, c'est moi.

So Mr. Bush thinks you're a bad guy -- and that makes you a potential target, no matter what you do.

On the other hand, Mr. Bush hasn't gone after you yet, though you are much closer to developing weapons of mass destruction than Iraq. (You probably already have a couple.) And you ask yourself, why is Saddam Hussein first in line? He's no more a supporter of terrorism than you are: the Bush administration hasn't produced any evidence of a Saddam-Al Qaeda connection. Maybe the administration covets Iraq's oil reserves; but it's also notable that of the three members of the axis of evil, Iraq has by far the weakest military.

So you might be tempted to conclude that the Bush administration is big on denouncing evildoers, but that it can be deterred from actually attacking countries it denounces if it expects them to put up a serious fight. What was it Teddy Roosevelt said? Talk trash but

carry a small stick?

Your own experience seems to confirm that conclusion. Last summer you were caught enriching uranium, which violates the spirit of your 1994 agreement with the Clinton administration. But the Bush administration, though ready to invade Iraq at the slightest hint of a nuclear weapons program, tried to play down the story, and its response -- cutting off shipments of fuel oil -- was no more than a rap on the knuckles. In fact, even now the Bush administration hasn't done what its predecessor did in 1994: send troops to the region and prepare for a military confrontation.

So here's how it probably looks from Pyongyang:

The Bush administration says you're evil. It won't offer you aid, even if you cancel your nuclear program, because that would be rewarding evil. It won't even promise not to attack you, because it believes it has a mission to destroy evil regimes, whether or not they actually pose any threat to the U.S. But for all its belligerence, the Bush administration seems willing to confront only regimes that are militarily weak.

The incentives for North Korea are clear. There's no point in playing nice -- it will bring neither aid nor security. It needn't worry about American efforts to isolate it economically -- North Korea hardly has any trade except with China, and China isn't cooperating. The best self-preservation strategy for Mr. Kim is to be dangerous. So while America is busy with Iraq, the North Koreans should cook up some plutonium and build themselves some bombs.

Again: What game does the Bush administration think it's playing? <http://www.nytimes.com>

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Document 1 of 1