The place we should really lose sleep over is North Korea, not Iraq. That's because President Bush is in effect acquiescing as North Korea builds up its nuclear arsenal.

An administration that was panicked about Iraq's virtually nonexistent nuclear programs is blase as North Korea reprocesses plutonium, enriches uranium and gets set to produce up to 200 atomic weapons by 2010. North Korea balances its budget by counterfeiting American $100 bills, so counting on its scruples not to sell a nuclear warhead to terrorists seems a dangerous bet.

Granted, all the North Korea options are awful. President Bill Clinton's approach was to bargain with North Korea, and that achieved a freeze on plutonium programs -- but the North Koreans cheated by starting a separate, much smaller uranium program. President Bush has refused to negotiate directly with the North Koreans, and the result is that Kim Jong Il is now pursuing both the plutonium and uranium approaches and could eventually produce several dozen warheads a year.

The upshot is that we've slipped from a troublesome situation to an appalling one. Now the administration is stalling for time, hoping that North Korea will collapse before its arms can proliferate. This looks like Iraq-style wishful thinking.

In the summer of 2002, insiders say, the U.S. had a defector report that Mr. Kim might soon be ousted. Experts on Korea were deeply skeptical about that unconfirmed report, but it matched what hard-liners wanted to believe, so they passed it all the way up to President Bush himself. That defector's report, later discredited, helped harden the administration's give-no-inch approach -- leading Mr. Kim to begin reprocessing plutonium last year.

On a visit to China last month, I interviewed North Korean refugees hiding in Manchuria. These are ordinary workers and farmers, not top officials, but they offer a window into the mood in the most isolated country in the world -- and those interviews left me feeling that the administration is wrong to believe that Mr. Kim will be ousted soon. A coup may be possible any day, but in such a tightly controlled society there's no hint of a popular uprising brewing from the ground up.
"People still believe in the late 'Great Leader' Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il; they still worship them," said Ms. Jung, a 26-year-old woman who dislikes her country's government. "I think Kim Jong Il will still be in power 10 years from now."

Another woman, Ms. Kim, said simply, "There's no thought of an uprising or a riot in North Korea."

A 62-year-old man, Mr. Ho, put it this way: "Most Koreans are against America, and Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il are against the Americans. So even though they are hungry, the people say the Kims will fight against America, and we are with them."

The refugees mostly said that they had respected Kim Jong Il until they reached China, realized that the world is not as they had been taught, and turned against him. And Mr. Kim's survival prospects may be enhanced by a slow rebound in the North Korean economy. Rick Corsino, an American who just ended a three-year term as director of the U.N. World Food Program in North Korea, traveled the country and saw it as no other American has. He says living conditions have improved a bit in the countryside and greatly in the capital, Pyongyang.

"Pyongyang has certainly shown signs of burgeoning prosperity," Mr. Corsino said. "There are more vehicles on the road, and people are dressing more colorfully than in the past. There's more electricity, more shops and restaurants opening."

Conditions are still wretched, he said, noting that last month his staff was at work at a local office where the inside temperature was 15 degrees Fahrenheit. Still, he said he had never seen any evidence that Mr. Kim's government was wobbling:

"The general conclusion of all of us who've been there and worked there and traveled all over the country is that I don't think any of us have seen any evidence of what you're talking about, a collapse coming."

If only it were different. But hope is a dangerous substitute for policy, and it's time to negotiate with North Korea directly instead of trying to wish its nuclear programs away. Mr. Bush's reluctance to reward bad behavior by the North Koreans is legitimate, but are we really better off sitting paralyzed by the sidelines as North Korea turns out nuclear warheads like hotcakes?

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