
Danger on the Korean peninsula

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This regional hotspot has global implications. The North Korean regime bears responsibility for a crisis that has yet to be resolved – one with possible links to terrorism. Our only hope lies in six-way negotiations, with Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, Moscow and, of course, Pyongyang at the table.

The nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula caused by North Korea's pursuit of nuclear weapons represents a serious challenge to global non-proliferation regimes and to peace and stability in East Asia and beyond. There is an ominous terrorist dimension to the crisis as well, given substantial evidence that organizations like al Qaeda would pay dearly to obtain the plutonium and highly enriched uranium that the DPRK alleges that it has already extracted from its spent fuel rods. As a result, the current nuclear standoff tests the fabric, if not the foundation, of the global non-proliferation regime and the international community's years of tireless effort to prevent the production and spread of nuclear weapons.

While the North's motives and intentions remain subject to debate, one point is clear: a failure to deal successfully with the crisis will represent a major setback for the global effort to halt the spread of nuclear weapons and could spark an arms race or further proliferation. Multilateral cooperation is essential; this is an international (rather than a bilateral US-DPRK or North-South) issue that affects global as well as regional security. This is why Washington opted for a six-party approach, bringing its two allies (the Republic of Korea and Japan) into the process, along with DPRK's two nuclear neighbors to the north (China and Russia), while continuing to threaten to take the issue to the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) if it cannot be resolved.

There is growing concern that if North Korea is allowed to pursue a nuclear weapons program without penalty, it could set a precedent, being only the first in northeast Asian nuclear

dominos, with Japan, South Korea, and/or Taiwan rapidly following suit. (Outside the region, Iran is no doubt also closely watching Korean peninsula developments.) While public attention seems focused on Japan, I would argue that Tokyo would be the least inclined to follow suit, provided it remains confident in the American nuclear umbrella. Of course, were Tokyo to feel abandoned by Washington in a neighborhood that already included two potentially antagonistic major powers – China and Russia – then the temptation to go nuclear would be much greater, regardless of North Korean capabilities. Whether Seoul would feel compelled to go nuclear – or whether it might come to assume that it will inherit this capability upon reunification – is more subject to question. The recent revelations of nuclear experiments in South Korea certainly raise this possibility. Of greater concern is Taiwan’s response. Many in Taipei are already arguing for an “offensive option” in response to the growing Chinese missile threat. The US previously had to intercede to halt embryonic nuclear programs both in South Korea and Taiwan; Washington’s leverage over the current governments (and its ability to detect clandestine activities in both) has arguably diminished, even as the incentive for nuclear weapons seems to be growing.

How we got here. It is useful to recall at the onset that this is a North Korean-induced crisis. It came about because of a deliberate action on the part of Pyongyang – a decision to circumvent the 1994 Geneva US-DPRK Agreed Framework, not to mention the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and several other bilateral agreements, by pursuing a uranium enrichment program. This is not to imply that the problem could not have been handled better. Washington’s initial inflexibility and the mixed signals that still emanate from the “internationalists versus neocons” debate within the Bush administration have made dealing with the crisis all the more difficult and have likely prolonged the effort to reach a resolution. But the major provocations and saber-rattling have emanated from North Korea. The fact, revealed by Pakistani nuclear arms merchant A. Q. Khan, that Pyongyang’s nuclear aspirations predate the Bush administration – let alone the infamous January 2002 “axis of evil” pronouncement or war in Iraq – indicates that these more recent events, while perhaps stimulating or causing an acceleration of the North’s clandestine nuclear activities, are not the root cause of this crisis. The cause is North Korea’s nuclear weapons aspirations, in direct contravention of numerous bilateral and multilateral promises and assurances.

To briefly review, the crisis began with US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly’s visit to Pyongyang in early October 2002 – the first trip to North Korea by a senior Bush administration representative. While Kelly reportedly advised his DPRK interlocutors that the Bush administration was prepared to pursue a “bold approach” in its dealings with Pyongyang, he insisted that North Korea first honor its previous

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commitments. Pyongyang reportedly responded to Kelly's allegations of North Korean cheating on its nuclear promises by defiantly acknowledging that it had a uranium enrichment program (although it would later claim that it merely said it was "entitled" to have one). While the US preferred diplomacy, Pyongyang immediately became publicly confrontational.

Once the details of the Kelly meeting emerged, Pyongyang escalated the crisis, first rhetorically, and then – after the announcement by the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization that it was temporarily halting shipments of heavy fuel oil (promised under the 1994 Agreed Framework in return for a halt in DPRK nuclear activities) – by expelling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors and removing IAEA monitoring devices and seals from its nuclear facilities. When Washington refused to be "blackmailed" into bilateral negotiations, the North (in early January 2003) announced its withdrawal from the NPT, restarted its five megawatt nuclear reactor and, by its own admission, began reprocessing its spent fuel rods – a dangerous escalation which also violated the 1992 North-South Joint Denuclearization Agreement, which Pyongyang conveniently declared to be "nullified".

The removal of IAEA safeguards and subsequent reprocessing made the nuclear crisis an antiterrorism as well as a non-proliferation issue, given terrorist aspirations for a "dirty bomb" or worse. This is not to imply a link between North Korea and al Qaeda or other international terrorist groups. To my knowl-

edge, none exists. In the past, North Korea has not funded international terrorism, being content to conduct it in-house. But Pyongyang has demonstrated a willingness to sell taboo weapons to taboo nations and has reportedly threatened to sell (as well as to develop and test) its nuclear weapons. Such threats helped spur the US-led multinational Proliferation Security Initiative.

DPRK motives remain unclear. More than two years into the crisis, it remains unclear what Pyongyang really seeks. Is it merely seeking direct negotiations with Washington, in order to swap (once again) its nuclear weapons programs for increased aid and security guarantees? Or does Pyongyang believe that it must possess nuclear weapons and is determined to pursue this option at all costs, even while pretending to be willing to negotiate if all its demands are met? Only time will tell. Given Pyongyang's history of cheating on past agreements, however, it is little wonder that the other five parties have stressed that any final agreement must include the complete, verifiable, irreversible dismantlement of the North's nuclear weapons programs.

While intelligence agencies speculate that Pyongyang could have as many as six or eight weapons as a result of past activities and recent reprocessing, the exact extent of its weapons program – or even whether it actually possesses any weapons at all – remains a mystery. North Korean diplomats have gone so far as to claim that they have “weaponized” their reprocessed plutonium and frequently boast of having a “powerful nuclear deterrence”. But, Pyongyang has been careful not to formally declare itself a nuclear weapons state or to give other unambiguous signs, such as conducting a nuclear test, realizing that such an action would open the door for UNSC action against Pyongyang. (Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow all currently think going to the UNSC is “premature”.)

There are, of course, some good reasons why the North – short of sanctions or war – may want the world, and more specifically the Bush administration, to think it has nu-



clear weapons. First, the belief – perhaps mistaken – that the possession of nuclear weapons may be an insurance policy against North Korean leader Kim Jong Il’s regime meeting the same fate as Saddam Hussein’s. This, plus the fact that threats appear to be Pyongyang’s leading export, and the only thing that, in the past, has brought hand-outs or garnered North Korea serious attention on the international stage.

But there are other downsides. South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun has repeatedly stated that North Korea can either enjoy the benefits of South Korean and international trade and assistance or it can go down the nuclear path; it’s a clear either/or choice. Russia has also stated that it would be forced to reconsider its opposition to sanctions or other harsh measures if North Korea were to come out of the nuclear closet and China has forcefully warned that such a step would not be in the North’s interests. Japan is already prepared to pursue a harder line. So Pyongyang’s challenge is to be specific enough to convince the Bush administration that it has nuclear weapons while being vague enough not to push its neighbors into seeking retribution. This is a dangerous game.

The Bush administration, especially with its second mandate, could at some point conclude that the consequences of not responding – with sanctions and censure, if not with surgical military force – would be less serious than the consequences of doing nothing and thus allowing Pyongyang to mass produce and possibly export such weapons grade materials. [One of the great ironies coming out of the Iraq experience is that Saddam may have actually curtailed his WMD program, but purposely impeded attempts by UN inspectors to prove this. Saddam apparently wanted the Bush administration (and the Iranians) to believe that Iraq had WMD, figuring that this provided a security blanket against an American invasion or march on Baghdad. He figured wrong!]

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Six-party talks: the best way forward. Washington, after pressure from South Korea and Japan, put forth, at the third plenary session in late June 2004, a detailed, seven-page proposal that laid out in specific terms what steps North Korea needed to take to dismantle its nuclear weapons program and, most significantly, what Washington and its allies were prepared to do in return. While all sides have agreed “in principle” to hold a series of working group meetings and another plenary session has been scheduled, as of this writing, for the week of July 25, it bears keeping in mind that agreements in principle are only as good as the principles of those doing the agreeing. Washington’s six-party approach nevertheless remains the best alternative since both the security assurances and “rewards” likely to come at the end of any successful process – and the verification mechanisms required to ensure implementation – will require broad-based participation and cooperation. Also, unlike the contentious 1994 Agreed Framework deliberations, it assures the Republic of Korea a seat at the table throughout the process.

South Korean nuclear revelations: serious but not threatening. If Pyongyang was looking for more excuses to put off coming back to the negotiating table, Seoul provided them with revelations this summer that a few ROK scientists, operating without government approval, had done some uranium enrichment experimentation of their own four years ago. In a commendable effort to demonstrate (admittedly belated) nuclear transparency, Seoul also acknowledged some limited plutonium-based experiments in 1982. The North subsequently announced that it could not proceed with the six-party talks since “the foundation for talks has been destroyed” as a result of Seoul’s secret nuclear experiments and Washington’s “double standards regarding the nuclear issue.”

Several IAEA inspection teams have since conducted a thorough inspection of all the nuclear research facilities in South Korea and, while noting that Seoul’s failure to initially report the limited enrichment experiments was a matter “of serious concern,” they discovered no evidence of a government attempt to clandestinely pursue a nuclear weapons program. The episode also underscored the importance of the NPT Additional Protocol, since it was the more intrusive inspections associated with this regime that prompted the ROK’s self-examination and revelations.

Seoul’s embarrassing revelations could actually provide a way out of the crisis for North Korea if it so chooses. If renegade scientists can be blamed for Seoul’s transgressions, certainly a similar group of “renegades” could be discovered in the North as well. Such an excuse was used in 2002 when Pyongyang confessed to the abduction of Japanese citizens. Diplomatic niceties (and a desire by all sides to move forward) would result in acceptance of almost any North Korean excuse if the end result was full disclosure by Pyongyang of its uranium and plutonium-based programs.

The road ahead: neither hopeful nor hopeless. The nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula can have serious implications for regional security on and beyond the peninsula itself, depending on how successfully the current stand-off is handled. A successful outcome will depend in large part on the ability of the other five participants in the six-party dialogue to speak with one voice in expressing common concerns and offering potential solutions. While there is little cause for near-term optimism, the long-term prospects are not necessarily hopeless.

There are several points on which all six parties already agree. First and foremost is that a war on the Peninsula serves no one’s interests. While North Korea issues threats of nuclear Armageddon almost daily, it has to realize that the outcome of any major confrontation (nuclear or not) will be the destruction of the North Korean state. Nor does Washington seek a military solution, given its preoccupation elsewhere and the high costs (in terms of human lives lost) should the military option be exercised. Concern over human and economic costs is clearly even more central for South Ko-

rea. While few would shed tears if Kim Jong Il himself were to fall, the uncertainty and costs involved in bringing about regime change in North Korea seem far higher than the presumed benefits. Beijing and Moscow see the utility of a North Korean buffer state. As a result, all seem prepared to live with an outcome that leaves the current North Korean regime in place. Finally, all six (North Korea included) reportedly agreed in Beijing to seek a nuclear weapons-free peninsula.

Based on these common elements, it is possible to envision a solution along the following lines: Washington, Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and Moscow would insist, with one voice and at a minimum, that North Korea fully, verifiably, and irreversibly freeze its various nuclear weapons programs as a precondition to further negotiations. This would include a return of IAEA inspectors and the placing of spent fuel canisters (and any extracted plutonium) back under observation. In return, the other members would guarantee no military strikes against North Korean facilities or its leadership as long as negotiations continue in good faith and the North likewise refrains from aggressive behavior. Washington, in close consultation with Seoul and Tokyo, and with Moscow and Beijing's concurrence, would then lay out a clear roadmap of what it is prepared to offer, and when, in return for North Korea's verifiable cooperative actions. On the other hand, negotiations may not succeed. Pyongyang may be committed to developing nuclear weapons and may be unwilling to accept demands for a complete, verifiable, and irreversible end to its weapons program. At that point, UNSC-enforced sanctions and other political, economic, and perhaps even military steps will have to be taken to contain the problem. Let's hope that the leaders of all six nations are flexible, creative, and wise enough to avoid this worst case scenario.

