

# Policy Forum 05-04A: 2004 Was a Difficult Year. Will 2005 Be Any Better?



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2004 Was a Difficult Year. Will 2005 Be Any Better?

PFO 05-04A: January 12th, 2005

## 2004 Was a Difficult Year. Will 2005 Be Any Better?

By Jon Wolfsthal

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### I. Introduction

Jon Wolfsthal, deputy director for Non-Proliferation at Carnegie, writes: "If North Korea's nuclear program cannot be eliminated, then the other members of the six party talks will have a difficult 2005 and beyond. Can South Korea accept a nuclear neighbor to the North and if not, what will it do to respond over the long term? This is the questions that will increasingly occupy the minds of American experts in the years to come unless 2005 surprises many and leads to a negotiated end to

North Korea's nuclear program."

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

## **II. Essay by Jon Wolfsthal**

- "2004 Was a Difficult Year. Will 2005 Be Any Better?"

by Jon Wolfsthal

In foreign affairs, anniversaries are always a good time to reflect on developments and judge whether policies are having the desired effect. It is now two years since the Agreed Framework collapsed, North Korea withdrew from the Nonproliferation Treaty and since Pyongyang restarted its plutonium production program. The results of efforts by South Korea, China, Japan and particularly the United States have failed to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear program and are now little but an empty shell of a policy. 2005 will be a difficult year, when tough decisions will need to be made by all of the affected governments or we will all need to learn how to live with a nuclear North Korea for many years to come.

While North Korea's nuclear program remains well hidden and hard to define, it is reasonable to make some assessments about Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities and intentions. The first is that it is all but certain that Pyongyang has taken the 8000 fuel rods previously stored at Yongbyon under the terms of the Agreed Framework and purified however much plutonium was contained inside. A worst case assessment suggests this could give Pyongyang enough material to produce an addition 5 to 6 nuclear weapons beyond what they may have had before the Agreed Framework went into force.

Harder to define is the extent of North Korea's uranium enrichment capability. It seems unlikely that the original US estimate that North Korea could begin producing enough highly enriched uranium for 2 weapons a year by the end of 2005 was accurate. Nevertheless, it does appear likely that North Korea was acquiring uranium enrichment equipment and will continue its efforts to perfect the technology unless convinced to do otherwise.

While it is true that 2004 also brought to light surprising facts about South Korea's nuclear activities, the world has shown that openness and cooperation can overcome suspicion and history. South Korea's successful fight to prevent the issue of its nuclear experiments and their resolution from being acknowledged by the UN Security Council was a domestic victory for the government, but made it harder to convince Pyongyang about the seriousness of its own activities in the eyes of the international community which have yet to bring North Korea's violations to the UN Security Council.

As for Pyongyang's intentions, they remain as difficult to judge as ever. However, given what has happened over the last two years, Pyongyang will likely feel more secure and more ambitious in 2005 than it did in 2004. North Korea has successfully expanded its nuclear weapons arsenal by some unknown amount, has managed to cause a serious rift between the United States and its regional allies. Moreover, it has successfully held off efforts to impose sanctions or other penalties for its stated withdrawal from all nonproliferation agreements constraining its nuclear program. With the United States military bogged down in Iraq and Washington's attention diverted elsewhere, there is little real pressure coming to bear on North Korea for its past nuclear actions and, knowing this, it would not be surprising to see Pyongyang try to push its advantage in the months to come.

The six party talks remain the focus of diplomatic efforts to shut down North Korea's nuclear program and improve relations between the Washington and Pyongyang. But the lack of seriousness from Washington, and the unwillingness of other regional members to force North Korea to participate and compromise on its demands suggest the talks will be as unsuccessful in 2005 as they have been to date. Washington put forward an unbalanced, but serious proposal in the June talks, but North Korea has not responded in kind, and the other members of the talks have not focused enough effort to make North Korea return to the negotiating table. The fine format of the talks cannot make up for the lack of desire among the two main parties to engage and work out an agreement, and unless the desire increases, the risks from a nuclear North Korea may increase as the months and years roll by.

If North Korea's nuclear program cannot be eliminated, then the other members of the six party talks will have a difficult 2005 and beyond. Can South Korea accept a nuclear neighbor to the North and if not, what will it do to respond over the long term? This is the questions that will increasingly occupy the minds of American experts in the years to come unless 2005 surprises many and leads to a negotiated end to North Korea's nuclear program.

### **III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses**

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