Policy Forum 04-33A: The North Korea Nuclear Issue: The Road Ahead

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The North Korea Nuclear Issue: The Road Ahead

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by Robert J. Einhorn

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I. Introduction

The following is a paper by Robert J. Einhorn, Senior Adviser at the Center for Strategic and International Studies and formerly Assistant Secretary of State for Nonproliferation in 1999 to August 2001. Einhorn writes: “if the North Koreans have decided they must have a substantial nuclear weapons capability whatever we may do (hardly a remote possibility), they would likely

reject a reasonable offer. In that event, the next U.S. administration would have little choice but to turn to a longer-term strategy of pressure, containment, and eventual rollback. But having made a proposal that North Korea's neighbors considered fair and balanced, we would be in a stronger position to gain multilateral support for that strategy."

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II. Essay by Robert J. Einhorn

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From the time it took office, the Bush administration has been deeply divided on North Korea. One camp has assumed that North Korea would never voluntarily give up nuclear weapons, believed that the North Koreans would cheat on any new agreement, and feared that such an agreement would prop up a tyrannical regime. This group has supported regime change as the most reliable way of disarming North Korea. The other camp, skeptical about Pyongyang's willingness to give up nuclear arms but dubious about prospects for regime change in the near term, has favored exploring a negotiated solution. For much of the past three years, differences between the two camps have blocked a coherent approach toward North Korea's nuclear program.

However, after Colonel Gaddafi agreed in December 2003 to give up his nuclear program, a compromise (actually, more of a truce) was reached on the basis of what the administration started calling the "Libya model" – according to which an autocratic regime, looking to end its international isolation, makes a strategic decision to give up its nuclear program quickly, completely, and transparently without the U.S. having to make concessions up front. Consistent with that model, if Kim Jong-il were prepared to follow Gaddafi's example and disarm on U.S. terms, the Bush administration would be willing to support the DPRK's integration into the world community, provide it assistance, and not seek to topple its regime.

The Libya model was the basis for the U.S. proposal tabled in late June 2004 at the third round of the six-party talks. It calls on North Korea first to make a clear commitment to dismantle all of its nuclear programs. Once that commitment is made, a three-month "preparatory period" begins during which North Korea makes a full declaration about its programs (including uranium enrichment), all nuclear activities are verifiably halted, any nuclear weapons are disabled, and preparations are made for the elimination (including by shipment out of North Korea) of all nuclear facilities, equipment, and materials. As Pyongyang takes credible steps during this preparatory period, the other parties reciprocate in various ways. Non-U.S. parties provide heavy fuel oil. A "provisional" multilateral security assurance is provided. The U.S. begins a "discussion" with the DPRK about its non-nuclear energy requirements, the lifting of remaining U.S. economic sanctions, and the removal of North Korea from the U.S. list of state sponsors of terrorism. At the end of the three-month period, a relatively short, but as yet unspecified, elimination period begins.

The U.S. proposal was welcomed by the other participants. South Korea and China, which had repeatedly asked the U.S. to show more flexibility, were relieved that a detailed U.S. offer had been made. Even North Korea reportedly deemed the proposal constructive. Meanwhile, administration officials stressed that their fundamental position had not changed. North Korea still needed to make a strategic decision to abandon nuclear weapons, after which total elimination would have to be achieved quickly – not via a prolonged series of steps that would give the North opportunities to stall, renege, or extort further concessions. Moreover, the Bush administration would not pay the

DPRK to live up to existing commitments. It would “discuss” future benefits and allow others to provide them early in the process, but the U.S. would not provide its own tangible rewards until dismantlement was essentially complete.

The DPRK’s approach is very different. It calls on the U.S., as a means of showing that it no longer has hostile intent, to provide inducements from the start. It resists dismantling its programs quickly, claiming that would forfeit its leverage to get the U.S. to live up to the deal. To preserve its deterrent for as long as possible, it presumably will seek to prolong the process and structure it in such a way as to enable it to opt out if it judges that getting rid of its capability entirely would put it at the mercy of a still-hostile U.S. Indeed, North Korea’s position so far in the talks reinforces doubts that it is prepared to give up its capability. While saying it supports de-nuclearization, it still denies having a uranium enrichment program, and its freeze proposal seems to exclude plutonium produced before its January 2003 NPT withdrawal – enough for eight or nine bombs.

There is little likelihood North Korea will accept the current U.S. proposal. It sees itself in a strong bargaining position. With American forces tied down in Iraq and stretched thin worldwide (and some U.S. troops even shifting from South Korea to Iraq), Pyongyang must calculate that a military threat from the U.S. is remote. Indeed, even before Iraq, the DPRK’s ability to devastate Seoul with its massive, forward-deployed conventional artillery and rocket forces was a strong inhibitor of U.S. military action. Economic factors do not compel DPRK flexibility either. Kim Jong-il appears to be serious about pursuing market reforms and probably realizes that such reforms cannot get very far if his country remains economically isolated because of the nuclear issue. But given the choice between maintaining his “powerful deterrent” and promoting the success of the reform effort, it is clear that he will give priority to security.

Pressures facing North Korea have also been reduced by Pyongyang’s successful strategy of seeking separate accommodations with its neighbors. By adopting a more conciliatory approach to North-South interactions in the economic, humanitarian, and even military areas (e.g., military confidence-building measures in the West Sea), it has reinforced the inclination of Roh Moo-hyun’s government to address the nuclear issue by offering carrots rather than threatening sticks. By taking steps to resolve the issue of Japanese abductees, it has increased prospects for resumed bilateral normalization talks and opened some daylight between U.S. and Japanese positions on North Korea. Its charm offensive is also paying dividends with China and Russia, both of which gave considerable support to North Korea’s position at the last six-party round.

There may still be one more round of talks before the November election but very little chance of making progress this year. North Korea knows the U.S. administration won’t turn up the heat in an election year and, in any event, Pyongyang will await the election results before making changes in its own position. Meanwhile, the Bush administration, believing that its recent proposal has undercut Kerry campaign criticism of its North Korea policy, will be content to run out the clock for 2004.

In 2005, the next administration could move in one of two very different directions. After a decent interval of trying unsuccessfully to get the DPRK to accept the U.S. offer, some in a second Bush administration may push for blaming North Korea for the deadlock, declaring the talks a failure, and seeking to ratchet up multilateral pressure against Pyongyang – including by calling for UN Security Council sanctions, stepping up Proliferation Security Initiative interdiction operations, and urging Japan to curtail trade and remittances. The goal would be to force North Korea to accept disarmament on U.S. terms or, if that does not prove possible, to contain, deter, and stifle the regime until it eventually collapses.

Such a strategy has little chance of succeeding. The idea that Pyongyang can be squeezed until it

capitulates or collapses is wishful thinking. The regime has been surprisingly resilient, defying repeated predictions of its imminent demise. Moreover, neither China nor South Korea wants a sudden, destabilizing collapse in the North. Especially in the absence of a U.S. negotiating position that Beijing and Seoul consider reasonable – and since the June round, they have already begun calling for more U.S. flexibility – both can be expected to resist U.S. appeals for squeezing the North and to continue providing the assistance needed to keep it afloat.

Reliance on pressure alone to disarm North Korea could result in the worst of all worlds – Kim Jong-il shores up his grip on power by resisting U.S. coercion; the DPRK continues augmenting its nuclear arsenal; the U.S. strains relations with the ROK and China in a futile effort to pressure them to coerce North Korea; and the South Korean people and government continue to realign themselves toward China and away from the U.S., harming long-term American interests in East Asia.

A preferable approach, one likely to be supported by some in a second Bush administration or by a Kerry administration, would be to explore whether a sound agreement is possible. It would adopt elements of the Bush proposal (e.g., clear commitment to complete elimination and full disclosure of all programs from the outset), but it would provide for a phased elimination in a longer timeframe. At the same time, the U.S. would join the others in offering incentives in each of the phases, including from the beginning.

To be sure, this approach has downsides, including the risk that the North Koreans sooner or later would try to cheat or pull out of the process before dismantlement is complete. These risks can be minimized but not avoided, reflecting the reality that has faced the last three U.S. Presidents: there are no good options in dealing with North Korea. An imperfect agreement is the least bad option.

Of course, if the North Koreans have decided they must have a substantial nuclear weapons capability whatever we may do (hardly a remote possibility), they would likely reject a reasonable offer. In that event, the next U.S. administration would have little choice but to turn to a longer-term strategy of pressure, containment, and eventual rollback. But having made a proposal that North Korea's neighbors considered fair and balanced, we would be in a stronger position to gain multilateral support for that strategy.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

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