



Policy Forum 04-42B: North Korea: Consider What We Don't Know



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North Korea: Consider What We Don't Know

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North Korea: Consider What We Don't Know

By Daniel Poneman

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I. Introduction

Daniel Poneman, member of the National Security Council staff under Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton, writes: "if...we defer tackling the plutonium threat while waiting for the North Koreans to admit to the world that they have been lying about their uranium program, the odds are that we will confront tragedy before we receive truth."

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II. Essay by Daniel Poneman

- "North Korea: Consider What We Don't Know"

by Daniel Poneman

Taken together, the 9/11 commission report and the recent Senate Intelligence Committee report on Iraq teach us how incomplete intelligence can lead us to exaggerate some threats and miss others. This suggests that where the mists of uncertainty part to reveal an unambiguous threat to our national security, we must confront it squarely. We now face such an unambiguous threat from North Korea.

How do we know? Because we have lost track of five to six atomic bombs' worth of plutonium there.

In the 1990s, American technicians went to North Korea and supervised the recanning of 8,000 plutonium-laden spent fuel rods. Then the International Atomic Energy Agency sealed the Yongbyon facility containing the rods, installed cameras and kept on-site inspectors there to monitor those rods.

When North Korea bolted the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty last year, it kicked out the inspectors, turned off the cameras and broke the seals. No one outside North Korea knows where the rods and their plutonium are now. Many assume the plutonium has been separated from the spent fuel, but we do not know. We also know that North Korea has restarted the reactor that produced that plutonium and is therefore producing still more plutonium for more bombs.

We know that six plutonium bombs could wreak devastation beyond that ever yet caused by man. So why aren't we, as a nation, trying to find and secure that plutonium which may even have been converted into weapons as rapidly as possible?

One reason is that we think that North Korea is developing a program to produce highly enriched uranium, the other major form of atomic bomb. North Korea has, by turns, coyly asserted and denied this program. U.S. officials claim they found evidence in 2002 of an enrichment program in North Korea. Abdul Qadeer Khan, the Pakistani Typhoid Mary of nuclear proliferation, could have provided the centrifuge blueprints and equipment. We hope that Pakistani authorities are obtaining all relevant information from Khan and sharing it with the appropriate authorities.

But consider what we don't know about the North Koreans' enrichment program: its location, how much centrifuge equipment they may possess, how many machines they have already built, what designs are being used, how capable their technicians are at mastering the difficult engineering of this demanding technology, whether North Korea has the uranium hexafluoride gas to feed into the centrifuges. Critically, we do not know how soon North Korea could produce bomb-grade highly enriched uranium, although published reports have not suggested that that day is imminent.

Now there is no question that the United States and other nations, working with the IAEA, should bend every effort to answer these questions. If an enrichment program exists, it must be found, declared, secured and verifiably dismantled.

It is also clear that U.S. policy is focused on the right goal: North Korea must disclose, safeguard and dismantle all of its nuclear fuel cycle, including any plutonium and enrichment facilities that

may exist.

But the United States is taking the position that it will not cut a deal on the plutonium that we know North Korea possesses unless Pyongyang "comes clean" on its enrichment program. This holds our ability to defuse Pyongyang's plutonium time-bomb hostage to a mystery we may not unravel for some time.

What to do? Rather than let what we think about uranium hobble what we do about plutonium, we should separate these two threats for negotiating purposes into separate tracks that acknowledge their differences in terms of clarity and urgency.

That would allow us to work simultaneously toward two urgent goals: arresting the plutonium threat while getting to the bottom of Pyongyang's uranium enrichment program. The United States would work with South Korea, Japan, China and Russia to provide some benefits to Pyongyang in exchange for shutting its plutonium-producing reactor while securing the missing plutonium and shipping it immediately out of North Korea.

Under this strategy, the toughest tactical decision would be to figure out how many carrots and sticks to wield to eliminate the near-term, known plutonium threat, while leaving enough in reserve to eliminate the longer-term, unknown uranium threat.

If, instead, we defer tackling the plutonium threat while waiting for the North Koreans to admit to the world that they have been lying about their uranium program, the odds are that we will confront tragedy before we receive truth.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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