

Policy Forum 05-02A: Fiddling While Pyongyang Reprocesses: Bush Administration Folly and the Emergence of Nuclear North Korea



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Fiddling While Pyongyang Reprocesses: Bush Administration Folly and the Emergence of Nuclear North Korea

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By Wade L. Huntley

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I. Introduction

Wade L. Huntley, Program Director at the Simons Centre for Disarmament and Non-Proliferation Research, Liu Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia, writes: "We cannot know whether a peaceful non-proliferation solution in Korea has already become impossible. We can know that, at this late stage, such an outcome will require bold innovation, tough engagement, and a sense of urgency in negotiations."

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II. Essay by Wade L. Huntley

-*"Fiddling While Pyongyang Reprocesses: Bush Administration Folly and the Emergence of Nuclear North Korea"*

by Wade L. Huntley

In his 2004 State of the Union address, President Bush reiterated a pledge he has made many times: "America is committed to keeping the world's most dangerous weapons out of the hands of the world's most dangerous regimes." However, the collapse of the US-DPRK Agreed Framework in the fall of 2002 has allowed North Korea ever since to draw continually closer to becoming armed with nuclear weapons.

The Agreed Framework, successfully restraining North Korea's plutonium-based nuclear program for nearly a decade, broke down following US charges in October 2002 that North Korea has a secret second uranium enrichment program. By December of 2002, North Korea had ended international monitoring at its Yongbyon nuclear complex, removed seals and surveillance equipment, and begun preparing to reprocess 8000 spent nuclear fuel rods into bomb-grade fissile material. Successful reprocessing would provide North Korea with enough plutonium for eight to ten nuclear weapons (instead of the one or two it has been suspected to possess). North Korea now claims that this reprocessing is complete, and it may also have the technology to turn the fissile material into functioning weapons without testing and designs to produce a compact nuclear warhead that could fit onto a missile. By some estimates, North Korea could command between 120-250 nuclear weapons by the end of the decade.

None of the diplomatic developments since October 2002 have slowed down this progress. The Bush administration is boxing itself into -- if it has not already tacitly accepted -- an inevitable nuclear weapons capability in North Korea. Such a development would permit emergence of just the kind of threat the Bush administration pledged to prevent.

CONSEQUENCES OF A NUCLEAR NORTH KOREA

The collapse of the Agreed Framework has had three basic consequences. The first consequence is exacerbated regional insecurity. A nuclear-armed North Korea would introduce powerful new uncertainties into Northeast Asian regional security relations. Although responsive acquisition of nuclear weapons by Japan or South Korea is far from inevitable, the long-term iterated implications of a nuclear North Korea are not obvious.

The second consequence is the threat to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT). North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT -- the first state ever to do so -- is a tremendous blow to the NPT regime, which has successfully prevented proliferation around the world and provides the strongest legal mechanism to compel disarmament by its five nuclear weapons signatories. The absence of expressions of concern by the Bush administration over North Korea's impact on the NPT regime more broadly is hardly surprising, given the administration's lack of faith in both non-proliferation and international treaties.

The third consequence of North Korea's reinvigorated nuclear program is its potential to proliferate fissile materials, nuclear weapons development technologies and expertise, or even completed operational weapons beyond Northeast Asia. Now focusing on this problem, the Bush administration launched the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a coalition of countries (including Canada) that aims to combat WMD proliferation through "pre-emptive interdiction" on land, sea, or air. However, this initiative cannot prevent North Korea from smuggling fissile materials into the black market if it was determined to do so. Ironically, because North Korea perceives the PSI as unnecessary, coercive and illegal, this effort may actually be making the overarching problem harder to solve.

BUSH ADMINISTRATION POLICY: THREE FAILINGS

The Bush Administration's de facto policy of "hostile neglect" toward North Korea has exacerbated this crisis. Yet, even among critics, the failings of this approach are not fully appreciated. Three distinct failures have undermined the Bush administration's handling of North Korea. One is conceptual, one strategic and one tactical.

1. The Conceptual Problem

The Bush administration came to power believing that US policy under Clinton had been too timid, determined that sustained US confrontation, including talk of regime change and threats of pre-emptive strikes, would eventually compel North Korea to capitulate to US wishes. Critics of this confrontational approach argue that engagement of North Korea, accompanied by positive incentives for cooperation, is much more likely to elicit desirable behavior.

This debate between "engagement" versus "confrontation" reflects the structure of US domestic debate about dealing with North Korea that has dominated for over a decade. However, this debate does not reflect the reality that North Korea neither dependably reciprocates US accommodation, as engagement advocates hope, nor routinely cowers to US intimidation, as confrontation advocates expect. Rather, North Korea's most consistent behavior has been to act provocatively whenever it sensed US attention waning. Not surprisingly, US policy has been most successful when it prioritizes interaction over neglect.

The distinction between engagement and interaction in this context is important. Engagement means adopting certain assumptions about DPRK willingness to reach deals and work to solve its internal crises through reform. Interaction means that Korean peninsula issues stay at the forefront of attention and lines of communication remain open even during periods of heightened tension.

This factor was a driving dynamic in the ebb and flow of post-1994 US-North Korean relations. When crises abated, Clinton administration policy often slipped toward neglect, encouraging North Korea to foment a new crisis to resuscitate interaction. This vacillation often undermined the administration's overarching engagement intentions.

Similarly, in its first two years, the Bush administration's actual behavior was to disregard North Korea as much as to confront it. This neglect, as much as the hostility, encouraged further provocation from Pyongyang.

Following the 2002 breakdown of US-North Korea relations, the Bush administration increased interaction through the six party talks and moderated its hostile rhetoric. However, these policy adjustments are marginal, and with its top advisors divided, the administration seemed content to push the whole issue to the side. For its part, North Korea has been content with this new status quo because the regime is free to pursue its nuclear weapons program without serious sanction.

2. The Strategic Problem

Enervated by this commitment to confrontation, Bush officials overlooked changing regional dynamics to embrace the simplistic belief that sustained US confrontation would compel North Korean capitulation to US wishes. The administration moved steadily to ratchet up US pressure on the regime; after the September 11 attacks, Bush officials also expected that aggressive US responses would further intimidate North Korea.

Instead, this US posture appears to have had the opposite effect, fuelling Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions by challenging its confidence that its conventional threat against South Korea alone would deter a US attack. This led inevitably to North Korea's defiant reaction to US charges over its uranium program during the now infamous October 2002 visit to Pyongyang by James Kelley.

The Bush administration subsequently condemned the uranium program, but avoided strong actions, claiming the situation could be handled diplomatically. Once confronted itself, the Bush administration belatedly discovered that it was unwilling to follow through on the threats implicit in its confrontational posturing. The administration's prudence, while welcome, exposed the strategic failure of its prior two years of confrontation.

3. The Tactical Problem

The choice of timing of the Bush administration's confrontation with North Korea over the uranium program was a third, tactical misjudgment exacerbating the other failures.

In October 2002, world attention was dominated by the looming showdown in Iraq. Bush officials expected that the subjugation of Saddam Hussein, by choice or by force, would also serve to intimidate Kim Jong Il by implicitly signaling that North Korea could become subject to the same type of pressure.

But Kim Jong Il probably judged that with the USA preparing for a major war against Iraq, US threats to act against North Korea simultaneously were far less credible. Thus, Kim may have perceived the confrontation over the uranium program as not a trap but a "window of opportunity" to make his nuclear gambit overt, and a risk worth taking to avoid Iraq's pending fate. Similarly, the Bush administration's passive response to North Korean defiance was also reinforced by its belated discovery of the constraints its Iraq policy placed on its capacity to respond proactively to North Korea's nuclear breakout, exposing the Bush team's tactical negligence in confronting North Korea over the uranium program just as it was gearing up for war in Iraq.

WAYS FORWARD

In the past there have been thought to be four options for moving forward. With the dissolution of the Agreed Framework freeing North Korea to move forward on its nuclear program as fast as it can, two of these options are now wholly unviable, the third is not working, and prospects for the fourth shrink daily.

1. Force

A military strike on the Yongbyon complex has long been in the US thinking. There are three problems with this option.

First, North Korea's nuclear program probably is no longer fully contained at Yongbyon.

Second, such a strike would risk a North Korean counter-attack that could devastate South Korea, subject Japan to missile attacks, or even trigger a broader regional conflict involving China.

Finally, South Korean opposition to US military action is unqualified, and the relationship is now so fragile that a US strike on Yongbyon, even if not precipitating a wider war, could permanently rupture the alliance.

2. Containment

Hardliners in the Bush administration continue hoping that coercive pressure will eventually compel North Korea to comply with US wishes. There is little evidence this approach has yielded real results in the past, and even less reason to believe it will do so in the future. Now well down the road of plutonium reprocessing -- once thought to be the Bush administration's containment "red line" -- North Korea's only serious constraints now are technological obstacles and diplomatic pressure from China.

Bush administration hardliners also hope that increasing pressure on the North Korean regime will induce its collapse. Such efforts have no support among regional neighbours, especially South Korea, who are building economic ties to North Korea, hoping to cajole it rather than coerce it into a peaceful regional role. Indications that recent North Korean economic reforms are taking hold suggest that expectation of near-term DPRK regime collapse is a chimerical hope, not a firm basis for policy.

3. Engagement

In its first two years the Bush administration had no direct contacts with Pyongyang. Since the collapse of the Agreed Framework, less confrontational voices within the Bush leadership have induced the administration to join the "six-party talks" process and indicate willingness to provide security assurances, political relations and economic support to a non-nuclear North Korea.

But administration hardliners continue to resist fully embracing engagement goals, while North Korea continues its longstanding practice of making conciliatory gestures lacking real substantive compromise as a distracting and delaying tactic. As each passing day brings North Korea closer to a full nuclear capability, Pyongyang has more reason than ever to embrace an interminable negotiating process. Predictably, each round of talks has achieved little more than agreement to hold further talks.

But even a return to Clinton-style engagement of North Korea, as expected had John Kerry won the US presidential election, would not now suffice to propel real progress. With the status quo now favoring North Korea's nuclear breakout, hopes for a peaceful non-proliferation outcome in Korea cannot depend on engagement as it has been practiced in the past.

4. The Grand Bargain

Military action won't work. Containment and continued neglect aren't working. Engagement isn't enough. What remains?

Some analysts have long advocated a "grand bargain" aimed at eliminating North Korean nuclear and missile programs and deeply cutting its conventional arms and forward deployments, in exchange for a peace treaty, diplomatic recognition, negative security assurances, and economic support. As the clearly dominant party, the United States can afford to offer North Korea its much-wanted security guarantee (through a regional guarantee of security to the entire Korean Peninsula) unconditionally, rather than first requiring Pyongyang's abandonment of its nuclear programs.

Diplomatic relations and lifted economic sanctions would accompany verified arms dismantlement. Initiating this approach would reassure all regional parties, and would also satisfy North Korea's own "criteria for judging that the US has given up its hostile policy," no longer allowing Pyongyang to hide behind its current justifications for its nuclear program or other military excesses.

Such a grand bargain is, at this stage, the only hope for a peaceful non-proliferation outcome on the Korean peninsula. With stagnancy serving North Korea's interests and no other party strongly motivated to shake up the situation, only a genuine US initiative can produce this outcome.

CONCLUSION: TIME IS RUNNING OUT

The unlocking of North Korea's nuclear program has shifted the status quo fundamentally. A peaceful non-proliferation outcome in Korea is still possible. Unfortunately, if a bold initiative toward forging a grand bargain is required to solve this crisis, and if US leadership must provide this initiative, there are few grounds for optimism. The Bush administration has shown no ability for urgent action. Divisions between dominant hardliners and the few top officials interested in some level of engagement have paralyzed the administration, leaving it mired in an ineffective posture of "hostile neglect".

Entering Bush's second term, the ascendance of administration hardliners and the entrenched control of Congress by the Republican right-wing bode ominously. In these circumstances, the recent appointment of Victor Cha as Asia Director in the National Security Council is a ray of hope: his concept of "hawk engagement" is deeper than some analysts have recognized, and his appreciation of the dangers of US inattention to the crisis is genuine. However, the administration is likely to remain committed to a confrontational approach that insists North Korea commit itself to full nuclear disarmament before the United States makes any definitive commitments in return. Given Pyongyang's deep-seated distrust of US intentions and perception of US threat, North Korea is unlikely to surrender its nuclear program until US non-aggression guarantees are firmly in place. This is a recipe for stalemate.

Meanwhile, the shifted status has opened the door to North Korea's increasing reliance on nuclear weapons acquisition as the security guarantee of last resort. The closer North Korea gets to an actual nuclear capability, its commitment to that capability will grow, and its willingness to negotiate away that capability will shrink. Once possessing a full-fledged nuclear capability, North Korea will be unlikely to surrender it voluntarily. It is more likely that Kim Jong Il is learning other historical lessons, such as the effectiveness of nuclear deterrence (which Iraq lacked), and the gradual global acceptance of a nuclear Pakistan (a country which, given their past missile and nuclear cooperation, North Korea may see as a model).

We cannot know whether a peaceful non-proliferation solution in Korea has already become impossible. We can know that, at this late stage, such an outcome will require bold innovation, tough engagement, and a sense of urgency in negotiations. Providing such initiative will require the Bush team to somehow realize that negotiation is not appeasement, prioritize interaction over neglect, and make US readiness to accommodate Pyongyang's abandonment of its nuclear programs as credible as US willingness to coerce it. The road has never appeared so daunting, but there is no other course.

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.

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