

# Policy Forum 05-22A: Allow Two Nukes For North Korea

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PFO 05-22A: March 10th, 2005

## Allow Two Nukes for North Korea

Hy-Sang Lee

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### I. Introduction

Hy-Sang Lee, emeritus professor of the University of Wisconsin and author of *North Korea: A Strange Socialist Fortress*, writes: "Under a settlement allowing a two-bomb scarecrow strategy... Pyongyang would be committing suicide if the bombs would be used in a first strike (inviting an obliterating retaliation), and this scarecrow strategy would be rendered precarious if one of the

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bombs would be sold. Hence, the two-bomb settlement is a second best option which still would respect the red line of the United States."

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 Hy-Sang Lee**

"Allow Two Nukes for North Korea"  
by Hy-Sang Lee

Since North Korea declared an indefinite boycott of the six-party talks on February 10 and followed up with a demand for bilateral negotiation with the United States, the other five parties have all called for Pyongyang to return to talk and in the same multilateral forum. However, bringing Pyongyang back to the Beijing forum is bound to end up with the same standoff as the three rounds of the talks experienced, because those five parties pursue incompatible goals in the talks, and hence cannot exert united pressures on the North to relent.

I argue that whereas Washington wants a complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement (CVID) of nuclear weapons and facilities by North Korea as soon as possible, South Korea, China, Japan and Russia all have the immediate, fundamental goal of preventing war in Korea and support the CVID merely as the long-term goal. I also believe that Pyongyang would never give up all its nuclear bombs, but could settle for a couple of them to be fissile scarecrows for territorial defense.

Accordingly, I propose that the United States face up to the minimum essential goals of both North Korea and all its neighbor countries, by offering to allow the North to hold two bombs until the two Koreas reunite; this could satisfy the North, as well as fulfilling the four neighbors' desire for continuing peace in the region and a nuclear-free Korea after unification.

North Korea started to build a weapons-type nuclear reactor in the 1970s, as part of military buildup aimed at uniting Korea on its terms. Until the early 1980s, however, the focus of the military buildup was on heavy conventional weapons; with the nuclear program pursued as a kind of reinsurance over the Soviet nuclear shield, rather than as an indispensable goal.

During the 1980s, the balance of power with South Korea turned unfavorable. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaled the loss of the Soviet nuclear shield. It was in this period that North Korea rushed to produce nuclear weapons single-mindedly.

Having lost the Soviet nuclear umbrella, North Korea appears to have decided to use those few bombs as a nuclear deterrent - "fissile scarecrows" if you will - set up among its aging conventional arsenal to scare off potential attackers of its territory. Such scarecrows could also have been viewed as a means to draw the United States into one-on-one negotiations aimed at concluding a peace treaty formally ending the Korean War.

North Korea has long sought a peace treaty with the United States, because such a treaty would be a prerequisite for unification on its terms: It would remove the main rationale for keeping U.S. forces in South Korea, and strengthen pro-North and sentimental nationalist groups which have regurgitated Northern propaganda in the South and campaigned for U.S. force withdrawal.

The fissile scarecrow strategy designed to secure territorial defense and push unification diplomacy worked in short order: the United States and North Korea signed the Agreed Framework in 1994. This agreement has been best known for fuel aid and the construction of two light-water reactors for

power generation for North Korea, in compensation for freezing existing reactors and safeguarding spent fuel under IAEA monitors. However, there were two other key provisions in the Agreed Framework.

One was for the two signatories to move toward normalization of relations as other issues of concern were addressed, and the other was to keep the plutonium which had been separated in 1989 for a pair of bombs under wraps until diplomatic normalization and the two light-water reactors were completed.

Containing specific provisions for preserving a couple of nuclear bombs for the foreseeable future, and moving towards peaceful relations with America in the meantime, the Agreed Framework clearly documented North Korea's pursuit of a scarecrow strategy with its nuclear weapons. Hence, Pyongyang still might settle for the same two bombs.

North Korea, in the June 2004 round of six party talks, laid out its thoughts on how to solve the nuclear issue as specifically as it was willing to do outside bilateral sessions. It offered to freeze and eventually dismantle all nuclear weapons facilities and post-IAEA plutonium, and to refrain from producing additional nuclear weapons, from testing them, and from transferring them. Left unaddressed were the two preexisting bombs and the new HEU program.

The specified offers are not only what Pyongyang could readily implement, but would also meet the essential requirement of the United States and North Korea's neighbors in solving the North's nuclear issue: preventing Pyongyang from using nuclear weapons or transferring them. Concerning the new HEU program, this could be the bargaining chip that North Korea would cancel in exchange for the five countries respecting North Korea's own red line - retaining the scarecrow bombs.

## **South Korea.**

The policy of South Korea toward the North Korean nuclear arsenal is fundamentally driven by the fear of another Korean war. Any war is esteemed as a cataclysm on the Korean people as a nation. Seoul wants to remove all nuclear weapons and material from the North; but the use of force to attain the CVID is rejected. At the same time, Seoul has actively strived to dissuade the United States from using force to win CVID in North Korea, through various actions including a proposal made at the six-party talks. The proposal called for a negotiation process beginning with a six-month period during which North Korea would declare and freeze "all" its nuclear programs and take the first step toward their eventual CVID, and the other parties would resume fuel oil assistance to the North and begin preparations for providing other rewards.

Whereas a resumption of oil shipment during the freeze period would support North Korea's demand for parallel concessions by both sides, Seoul's proposal did not specifically require Pyongyang to account for either the HEU program or the plutonium separated in 1989. The South's position was essentially the same as the North's: both would keep the HEU program as well as the two old bombs under wraps, while Pyongyang's dismantlement steps would be matched by rewards in some symmetrical steps. Seoul's proposal is designed to prevent war first and seek CVID to the extent possible.

## **China.**

Chinese goals toward the North Korean nuclear program are similar to South Korea's: remove if possible, but avoid any actions which might end North Korea abruptly. Cutting off the large Chinese

shipments of food and gasoline to North Korea could break the impasse over the nuclear issue in a short time, but might topple the country even sooner. Hence, Beijing has used the economic leverage briefly once to compel the North to come to the six-party talks, but is not doing it decisively to broker the talks to a CVID agreement.

If united, China clearly wants a nuclear-free Korean peninsula. However, China would prefer a separated North Korea, and, until very recently, have gone as far as expressing doubt over the existence of a HEU program, apparently to restrain U.S. drastic actions against the regime. Lately, mistrustful views have been raised by the Chinese regarding the U.S. motive for urging stronger Chinese pressure on the North.

## **Japan.**

In addition to participating in the six-power talks, Tokyo has been in an emotional dispute with Pyongyang on the abducted Japanese citizen issue. Regarding the nuclear crisis, Japan genuinely supports CVID in North Korea, but has other security concerns whose urgency pushes the CVID into a longer-term objective. Due to geographic proximity to the North and the atmospheric wind blowing east from Korea to Japan, the Japanese are abhorrent to any prospect of war breaking out on the Korean peninsula. Waves of boat people and the possibility of mushroom clouds floating towards their peaceful archipelago are a nightmare for the Japanese. A nuclear-free Korean peninsula would be necessary for Japan to remain nuclear-free herself in the long run, but the essential requirement of Japan toward the troublesome North Korea must be understood as prevention of war on the peninsula.

## **Russia.**

With much of the vast but under-populated landmass of the Russian Far East being fairly remote from North Korea, Moscow's interests in the nuclear crisis relate more to economic opportunity than with security issues. Constructing a natural-gas pipeline through North Korea carrying Siberian gas to the South Korean and Japanese markets has long been a goal of Russian diplomacy in the region. Toward this end, a gradual transition to a South-led unification would certainly be more favorable to Russia than a destructive Korean war or an impoverishing unification steered by Pyongyang. Peaceful attainment of CVID would be ideal, but less important than forestalling a war.

## **Policy Implications for the United States.**

Despite the failure so far, the six-party talks are still useful for generating concerted pressures for a peaceful settlement, and for post-agreement aid cooperation. To realize the true potential of the regional forum, however, the Bush administration should move from the maximalist stance to the next best option consistent with the common red lines of the North's neighbors.

Nuclear non-proliferation which became a red line for the United States with the 9/11 tragedy has the immediate objective of preventing fissile material from falling into the hands of potential terrorists. North Korea remains a potential terrorist. Under a settlement allowing a two-bomb scarecrow strategy, however, Pyongyang would be committing suicide if the bombs would be used in a first strike (inviting an obliterating retaliation), and this scarecrow strategy would be rendered precarious if one of the bombs would be sold. Hence, the two-bomb settlement is a second best option which still would respect the red line of the United States.

Because putting the bombs under international monitoring would expose their whereabouts and

subject them to destruction by preemptive strikes, such bombs would lose much of their ability to frighten and would therefore be unacceptable to the North. All other nuclear facilities and bombs in North Korea should be openly and verifiably dismantled and monitored, but the two scarecrow bombs should be allowed to be kept in externally unknown places. This would check the possibility of these two bombs leading to a new wave of proliferation in Northeast through a compromise proposal in which the U.S. would get CVID minus two unmonitored bombs. I also believe that Japan and South Korea would be more than happy to allow North Korea to possess two bombs, believing it would help avert a war and lead to a peaceful settlement.

Moreover, leaving the North with a pair of bombs would not contradict the principle of non-proliferation, as the proposal is for an inherently limited time pending Korean reunification. The currently separated Koreas are proposed to be required to pledge to wipe out all traces of nuclear arms from the peninsula upon reunification. This also keeps the North in compliance with the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty as, even though North Korea would have two nuclear weapons, it would be moving towards eventual disarmament as specified in the NPT. Two scenarios exist for reunification, early and late.

Arguing for later reunification is that fifty years of "remaking mankind" through the unique Juche ideology of Kim Il Sung has turned most North Koreans into a flock of sheep, incapable of acting against their shepherd no matter how hungry they get. Yet Kim Jong Il's departure would likely usher in an end of North Korea. Arguing for an early unification, on the other hand, are signs of a rapidly corrupting and decaying government and production structure. Reportedly, foreign buyers find no one in a North Korean production unit daring to make even elementary decisions on issues such as price quoting or setting a delivery date, without checking with resident intelligence officers who are in actual control and who demand bribes.

Regardless of how long the Kim regime might last, however, the world must act as quickly as possible to stop further proliferation of nuclear arms within North Korea itself, because once Kim is gone, it could be difficult to locate and take control of hidden and scattered fissionable material in a likely precarious post-Kim environment.

The two-bomb proposal could hasten a settlement by addressing the North Korean reason for avoiding talks, namely the "hostile policy" of the Bush administration. There could not be any better way of demonstrating the absence of intention to attack North Korea than proposing to leave nuclear bombs employable for counterattacks. The proposal would also place the mutually acceptable outcome up front. Letting the North realize its core goal of owning bombs would facilitate an agreement on the secondary question which has stalled six-power talks --whether dismantlement of nuclear weapons should come before rewards or in parallel steps with rewards.

The standoff on the secondary question has actually mirrored the fiercely waged conflict on the final outcome itself. Even if symmetrical rewards were offered in considerable generosity in return for CVID, North Korea would likely have dragged the talks out and taken all interim rewards rendered, without giving up its scarecrow defense strategy in the end.

There are other advantages as well as pitfalls of the two-bomb ideas, as discussed below.

Pitfalls:

1. Pyongyang may reject the proposal, either tactically or due to a deeper calculation. The proposal should be first presented to the four negotiating partners requesting that if this good-faith offer is rejected, they go all out to exert united pressures including UN sanctions to compel the North to relent.

2. Once a two-bomb proposal is put on the table, Pyongyang may accept the idea of limited allowance but begin to demand a three, four, or higher limitation. It would be essential to secure from the negotiation partners, especially South Korea and China, an assurance to sternly stick to the two weapon limit.
3. Serious questions are bound to be raised by North Korea about the U.S. and Japanese anti-missile projects. Would developing anti-missile missiles not be easier against two targets than many? If the two-bomb idea is to have chance with Pyongyang, the ongoing projects may need to be reconsidered to the extent of Japan suspending them, and the United States not deploying them in the North Pacific regions.

#### Advantages:

1. If rejected by North Korea, its neighbors could reconsider the situation, and become amenable to a determined harnessing of the regime.
2. Upon reunification, a nuclear-free Korea should be a major contributor to the regional security. Reneging on the commitment to go nuclear-free would be unlikely due to the heavy requirement for reconstruction assistance.
3. Being an inherently time-limited grant of nuclear status to the North in a unique historical situation, the solution should not become a precedent for degrading the principle of non-proliferation.
4. By virtue of tying the nuclear status of the North to Korean unification, the United States would be seen in genuine support of unification, this would weaken the accusation among younger Koreans of U.S. imperial designs in the South, and ease U.S.-South Korea relations.

### **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](mailto: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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