

Policy Forum 08-051: Caution Against Overestimating Pyongyang's Move



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By Andrei Lankov

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I. Introduction

Andrei Lankov, an Associate Professor at Kookmin University, Seoul, and Adjunct Research Fellow at the Research School of Pacifica and Asian Studies, Australian National University, writes, "The

efforts of the negotiators are not likely to produce the ideal outcome, that is, complete and verifiable destruction of all North Korean nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, it is possible to achieve the compromise, which will make the further increase of the North Korean nuclear arsenal impossible."

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II. Article by Andrei Lankov

- "Caution Against Overestimating Pyongyang's Move"

By Andrei Lankov

So, it has finally happened. After many delays the North Korean government submitted the list of its nuclear activities and stockpiles. As a sign of reciprocity, the United States decided to remove North Korea from its official list of terrorist sponsors.

So, does all this mean that there are good reasons for optimism? Did Kim Jong-il and his henchmen finally see the light and decide to become good citizens of the international community? Are they ready to surrender their nuclear weapons after extracting sufficient "compensation" from the U.S. and outside world?

Frankly, this does not seem very likely. To start with, North Korea has almost nothing to gain by giving up its nuclear weapons, and this is widely understood in Pyongyang. In spite of their penchant for seemingly irrational and erratic behavior, North Korean leaders know what they are doing. Actually, they are remarkably efficient and cold-minded calculators. Alas, this time their calculations seem to indicate that denuclearization will be a mistake.

Right now, the North Korean nuclear arms program has three distinct goals, each being quite important for Pyongyang. First of all, North Korea needs nuclear weapons as a powerful deterrent. They are afraid of a foreign attack, and after Iraq and Afghanistan such fear can hardly be dismissed as paranoid and unfounded. However, the Pyongyang rulers believe - and ostensibly with good reason - that no nuclear-armed country would ever be invaded by any great power.

Second, they need the nuclear weapons as a blackmail tool. The Pyongyang leaders are painfully aware that in terms of the population size and economic significance the closest analogue to their country is, of all places, Mozambique. Therefore, the only reason why the international community pays so much attention to North Korea is their nuclear program.

In other words, the existence of nukes means that every time North Korea has a trouble it can start making threatening noises to squeeze some aid from the outside world. They are afraid that without nuclear weapons the world will become far less willing to satisfy their demands - and they are probably correct. Even if the surrender of nuclear weapons is likely to produce a large compensation payment, this lump sum money will not last forever. Meanwhile, the existence of nuclear weapons creates opportunity for systematic and regular extortion.

Last but not least, the nuclear program is important domestically. The nuclear test, held in a remote mountain area in October 2006 was actually the only visible "success" of Kim Jong-il's rule. The Pyongyang propaganda now insists that sufferings and destitution of the last 15 years were a necessary sacrifice, voluntarily made by the North Koreans in order to safeguard themselves against their surrounding enemies (above all, the "blood-thirsty Yankees" who dream about destroying entire Korean race).

Therefore, surrender of the nuclear weapons will render these sufferings and deaths meaningless.

However, this does not mean that North Koreans are not willing to compromise. For example, they do not mind dismantling their Yongbyon nuclear complex as well as some other well-known facilities. The reason for such willingness is simple. They do not need these facilities any more.

Indeed, the above-mentioned tasks of deterrence, international blackmail and internal propaganda do not really require a large number of nuclear devices. A dozen or so of warheads safely hidden somewhere in the underground storage facilities do the job just fine.

The Pyongyang leaders understand very well that they cannot possibly out produce Los Alamos or Arzamas-16, so their nuclear arsenal will never approach the quantities of the U.S. or Russia or China. North Korea will never have thousands of nuclear devices.

They do not need this, however. For their purposes they have produced enough.

This means that the Yongbyon nuclear complex has accomplished its mission. Actually, the complex is merely a large collection of rusty equipment, which can be sacrificed or, to put it in more frankly, sold to a foreign buyer if the price is right.

Therefore, we should not be too surprised if we see on our TV screens the impressive sight of Yongbyon being dismantled in the presence of TV crews by some spectacular method which will produce a visually powerful image.

After all, the demolition of the cooling tower in Yongbyon is being televised for the foreign audience. One can easily predict that the media will be full of remarks about the "historical breakthrough" and "decisive step" on the way to "denuclearization." Actually, these remarks will be misleading. The demolition of Yongbyon will be more akin to a basement sale of useless stock.

Therefore, one might expect that the North Korean nuclear declaration, finally produced this week, contains a rather comprehensive data about the production facilities which have been used to manufacture the North Korean nuclear weapons.

However, there are good reasons to doubt whether this list will disclose the sites, which are now used to keep the weapon-grade plutonium and assembled nuclear devices. This is not something, which is likely to be sacrificed as long as Kim Jong-il and his family stay in control.

Hence, the North Korean negotiation strategy is predictable. Pyongyang makes small concessions, demanding a generous monetary reward for each "step in right direction." Even if the final goal is unlikely to be reached, the North Koreans will acquire something in the process of movement.

Does this mean that negotiations are useless? Perhaps not. The efforts of the negotiators are not likely to produce the ideal outcome, that is, complete and verifiable destruction of all North Korean nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, it is possible to achieve the compromise, which will make the further increase of the North Korean nuclear arsenal impossible.

It is also possible that in spite of the "Syrian affair", North Koreans will agree to a thorough implementation of non-proliferation measures. After all, it is the proliferation, which is the major concern of the West, and especially the United States in dealing with the North.

However, in order to achieve a compromise, the U.S. side should accept either the quasi-nuclear status of North Korea or, at the very least, some ambiguity about this issue for North Korea to be

declared nuclear-free, but nobody will be quite sure whether this is really the case.

However, it remains to be seen whether such a compromise will be acceptable to the American side. It is also not clear how far the North Koreans will go. No doubt, the declaration is good news, but we'd better not to fool ourselves by overestimating its significance.

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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Nautilus Institute
608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:
nautilus@nautilus.org