Policy Forum 05-49A: Dealing With the North Korean Nuclear Threat

The NAPSNet Policy Forum provides expert analysis of contemporary peace and security issues in Northeast Asia. As always, we invite your responses to this report and hope you will take the opportunity to participate in discussion of the analysis.

Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 05-49A: Dealing With the North Korean Nuclear Threat", NAPSNet Policy Forum, June 14, 2005, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/dealing-with-the-north--orean-nuclear-threat/

Dealing With the North Korean Nuclear Threat

Dealing With the North Korean Nuclear Threat

Policy Forum Online 05-49A: June 14th, 2005

Dealing With the North Korean Nuclear Threat

By Don Oberdorfer

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

Don Oberdorfer, Distinguished Journalist in Residence and adjunct professor of international relations at the Johns Hopkins University's Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, wrote: "The United States didn't like the leaders of the Soviet Union -- but we found ways to engage them.

We didn't like the Chinese in the era before the 1970s, but we found ways to engage them also. I believe that ways can be found to seriously engage the North Koreans, difficult as it might be. Whatever means are chosen to deal with it, the problem of nuclear weapons in the divided Korean peninsula is too dangerous to be left to fester."

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 Don Oberdorfer

- Dealing With the North Korean Nuclear Threat
by Don Oberdorfer

North Korea's nuclear weapons program and its related ballistic missile program were the focus of the concerns that gave rise to that country's inclusion in the "axis of evil" unveiled by President Bush in his 2002 State of the Union address. They represent the most immediate and most dangerous weapons proliferation problem facing the world in what Professor Paul Bracken of Yale has called the "second nuclear age."[1] The first nuclear age was that of the Cold War, dominated by the massive and sophisticated nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union. The second nuclear age is in some respects more risky, involving the spread of atomic weapons to countries that are less than stable or which exist in areas of deep hostility, suggesting a greater possibility that their weapons might be used. These include India, Pakistan, Israel, potentially Iran, until recently Libya and now especially North Korea.

The roots of the problems on the Korean peninsula go back a long way. It is essential to grasp them in order to understand what is going on.

Americans tend to think about "North Korea" and "South Korea" as if these were fixed entities, like Britain and France. On the contrary, Korea is one country, only divided into two unexpectedly and unfairly at the end of World War II.

The Koreans have a distinct culture of their own, which is among the oldest on earth, going way back far before the time of Christ. From the 7th century A.D., rival tribal kingdoms were unified with Chinese help. From then until the mid-20th century, Korea was one country under a single administration with a distinctive language and strong traditions.

The Korean peninsula is like a little thumb coming down from the vast mainland of Asia. Koreans have always lived in a dangerous place, surrounded by three of the major powers of the world: China, Japan, and Russia. Stuck in a vulnerable position between more powerful neighbors, Korea has often been invaded and occupied. Koreans are tough people who survive in a tough neighborhood.

Following the Russo-Japanese war (1904-5), which was fought in part over Korea, Japan annexed Korea as a colonial possession. And so it lived under much-resented Japanese rule, until Japan's defeat in World War II. In August 1945, after the U.S. had dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the Japanese were suing for peace, the Soviet Union began moving troops from Manchuria southward into the Korean Peninsula, heading for Japan. In Washington, the U.S. high command was alarmed by the troop movements and feared that, unrestrained, Soviet forces might invade Japan before Americans and claim a share in the occupation.

A high command meeting in the Executive Office Building next to the White House pondered what to

do. Around midnight two colonels were sent to an adjoining room with instructions to draw a line across the Korean Peninsula, where the U.S. would divide occupation duties with the Soviet Union, in order to stop the Soviets from taking the entire Peninsula and perhaps moving on to Japan. One of those colonels was Dean Rusk, our future Secretary of State. He reported in his memoirs that he had had no preparation for this task, and that all he had was a National Geographic map.[2] Finding no natural dividing line on the map, he and his colleague simply drew the line at the 38th parallel, about halfway up the peninsula and slightly north of the national capital of Seoul. The United States announced that it would take the surrender of the Japanese forces in the southern part of the peninsula up to the 38th parallel, leaving the northern part to the invading Soviets. Joseph Stalin, who did not want trouble with the U.S. administration, ordered his troops to stop at the dividing line. This was to be a temporary expedient until the two sides could form a legitimate government to rule all of Korea, perhaps under a trusteeship arrangement that had been discussed by the great powers earlier.

The separation proved to be anything but temporary. It still exists today. Gregory Henderson, a former U.S. Foreign Service officer and Korea scholar, wrote in 1974, "No division of a nation in the present world is so astonishing in its origin as the division of Korea; none is so unrelated to conditions or sentiment within the nation itself at the time the division was effected; none is to this day so unexplained; in none does blunder and planning oversight appear to have played so large a role. Finally, there is no division for which the U.S. government bears so heavy a share of the responsibility as it bears for the division of Korea."[3]

North of the 38th parallel, the Soviet Union created a Soviet-style government, the Democratic Peoples Republic of Korea (DPRK), and put in charge a 38-year-old guerrilla commander who called himself Kim Il Sung. South of the line, the United States brought in a 70-year-old graduate of George Washington University, Harvard, and Princeton, Syngman Rhee, who created a pro-Western government, the Republic of Korea (ROK), in the southern part of the peninsula. Each of these antagonistic regimes insisted that it was the only legitimate government of Korea.

In 1949, Kim Il Sung asked Stalin to authorize an invasion of South Korea, to unify the peninsula. Stalin refused, fearing U.S. intervention. In 1950, Stalin changed his mind for reasons still uncertain. Even the recently opened Soviet archives say only that Stalin decided to back the invasion because of "changed international circumstances." We don't know what his considerations were, but we do know that in 1949, the communists triumphed over the nationalists in China and launched the People's Republic; that the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb; and that in early 1950 Secretary of State Dean Acheson said in a speech that the defense perimeter for the United States in Northeast Asia ran through lines which excluded the Korean peninsula.

On June 25, 1950, North Korea attacked South Korea with the help of the Soviet Union. The first attack plans were written in Russian and translated into Korean. President Truman acted very much as President George H.W. Bush acted with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, declaring that this invasion over recognized boundaries would not be permitted to stand. He sent American troops under the U.N. flag and the Korean War was on. It was a three-year, bloody battle marked by massive Chinese intervention and fighting up and down the devastated Korean peninsula. The war ended with an armistice in battle lines very close to where it began, a jagged division intersecting the 38th parallel halfway up the peninsula.

South of the line, the South Koreans have built one of the world's most important economic entities. According to the most recent World Bank figures, this little half of this little peninsula may be the 10th largest industrial economy on the globe. It is also a very democratic country. Neither the economic side nor the democratic side came easy. The breakpoint in terms of democracy was 1987. For decades before then, South Korea was dominated by military rulers, some of whom, particularly

the first and long-term military ruler, Park Chung Hee, suppressed political opposition but also did a lot to build the economy.

North of the line, North Korea remains an economic disaster and the last Stalinist state. Kim Il Sung, who created an extraordinary personality cult, ruled for three decades until his death in 1994. He passed power to his son, Kim Jung-Il, who had effectively run the country for some time before that. In the mid-1990s, after the demise of the its original sponsor, the Soviet Union, perhaps a million or more of the country's 22 million people died of starvation or starvation-related illnesses. Mountainous North Korea will never be self-supporting in food, and its backward economy has been unable to sustain trade enough to fill the gap. A huge share of resources goes to support one of the world's largest military forces. Human rights are deplorable. Perhaps 200,000 people -- the exact number is unknown -- languish in concentration camps.

The North Koreans have always wanted nuclear weapons. The United States threatened to use nuclear weapons against them during the Korean War, although this was never done. When the Chinese exploded their first nuclear device in 1964, Kim Il Sung sent word to Mao Tse-tung, the leader of China, asking his "brother" to share the secrets of nuclear weapons. Mao refused.

When South Korea began losing confidence in U.S. protection in the early 1970s, it began a secret nuclear weapons program. The Gerald Ford administration in Washington found out and quietly quashed it, telling Seoul's leaders privately that they must choose between nuclear weapons and the U.S. alliance. One of those who was instrumental in this process was the then Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld.

North Korea began nuclear research in the early 1960s with Soviet assistance. Around 1980, North Korea launched a serious drive to produce plutonium on an industrial scale. That year U.S. reconnaissance satellites began photographing a very large nuclear construction site in the bend of a river near the city of Yongbyon, about 60 miles north of Pyongyag.

Under pressure from the Soviet Union, North Korea in 1985 signed the Non-Proliferation Treaty, pledging not to employ its nuclear facilities to create weapons and to permit the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), a UN organization, to inspect and monitor its nuclear activities. Due to a variety of ruses and weak external demands, the first IAEA inspectors of its rapidly developing atomic works did not arrive until May 1992. Their presence touched off a series of confrontations about what they could see and do. These came to a head in early 1993, in the first months of the Clinton administration, when North Korea threatened to withdraw from the treaty rather than submit to the intrusive inspections that the IAEA demanded.

The showdown between the U.S. and the D.P.R.K. became increasingly tense until former President Jimmy Carter, who was alarmed by the possibility of war, flew to Pyongyang in June 1994 to see Kim Il Sung. Until that point, no American with international stature had been to see the man who held the power of decision in North Korea.

"The Great Leader," as he was known in Pyongyang, told Carter that "creating trust is the main task" between the two countries. Kim said he would dismantle the nuclear facilities at Yongbyon if the United States would arrange the supply of nuclear energy from light-water reactors, which had been under discussion between the two nations and which are less susceptible for diversion to weapons production. He also agreed that IAEA inspectors, who had been told they were being evicted from the country, could remain. As part of a solution to the dispute, he also requested U.S. guarantees against nuclear attacks on the DPRK.

Three weeks after seeing Carter, Kim Il Sung died. His son and successor, Kim Jong Il, adhered to

the main lines of what his father had told Carter. Through sometimes-laborious negotiations in Geneva, U.S. and North Korean teams nailed down details of a multifaceted deal. It froze work at the Yongbyon facilities under continuous IAEA inspection with a promise of dismantlement after receiving light-water reactors to be supplied by an international consortium financed by South Korea and Japan. Washington promised 500,000 tons of heavy fuel oil per year while the new reactors were being built, and a variety of economic and political concessions. The signing of the Agreed Framework, as it was officially called, in October 1994, appeared to spell an end to the North Korea nuclear crisis. The Economist expressed a widespread sentiment when it wrote that the world "breathed a sigh of relief."

That sigh of relief lasted for eight years, until October 2002, when the Bush administration confronted North Korea with U.S. intelligence that Pyongyang had been secretly pursuing another avenue for production of nuclear weapons -- that of highly enriched uranium. Rumors and reports of such a program, mostly supplied by Pakistan, had reached U.S. intelligence for several years, but its extent and seriousness were unknown. In the summer of 2002, however, U.S. intelligence agencies gained solid information about North Korea's ambitious acquisition of centrifuges and centrifuge materials, the key apparatus for producing enriched uranium of weapons quality. Their conclusion was that North Korea was seeking secretly to create production- scale facilities to produce highly enriched uranium for nuclear weapons. It is arguable whether this was a violation of the letter of the Agreed Framework, which principally covered North Korea's plutonium works, but it was a clear violation of its spirit and of the DPRK's denuclearization agreement with the ROK and of the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly, the State Department's senior Asian affairs official, traveled to Pyongyang on October 3-5, 2002, accompanied by officials from the State Department, National Security Council and the Defense Department. President Bush had famously included North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, in a rhetorical "Axis of Evil" in January 2002, but by the summer the administration had decided to propose a "bold approach" suggesting wide-ranging arms control and political measures by North Korea in return for major concessions from Washington. The North Koreans had been led to believe that this would be the subject of the Kelly mission.

Kelly anticipated flat denials of the secret nuclear program, but in the most important meeting, with First Deputy Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju, there were none. Instead Kang, after an all-night meeting with party and government officials, declared that the DPRK was "entitled" to have nuclear weapons "and more" because of U.S. hostility and made other statements that appeared to acknowledge that the accusation was true. Kelly, under instructions not to negotiate, left without further resolution of the issue. North Korea's response was kept secret for 12 days before it was announced in Washington as the news was leaking to the press.

In early November, exactly one month after the Kelly mission, I was in Pyongyang with Donald Gregg, president of the Korea Society in New York and a former U.S. ambassador to South Korea, and Fred Carriere, Korea Society vice president. We saw the same people Secretary Kelley and his party had seen. Although as in Kelly's case there was no clear or explicit admission, there was not a word of denial that they were actively pursuing a highly enriched uranium program. We told them flatly that this was an extremely serious breach of the relationship between us, and that any future agreement would require the most rigorous verification because of this violation of nuclear accords. They said that they would "clear the concerns" of the United States in return for three things:

1. Recognition of their sovereignty, a statement that would imply their acceptance as a legitimate state which is not to be attacked or overthrown.
2. No interference with their economic development. That is, no economic sanctions or embargoes

against them. They were not asking for any form of economic assistance.

3. Negotiation of a nonaggression treaty by which the United States would legally assure North Korea that it would not attack with nuclear weapons or other means.

My own belief was that this was their opening bid for negotiations, not necessarily what a negotiation would produce if and when one was underway. We returned to Washington and urged high officials of White House and the State Department to engage Pyongyang urgently in a discussion of eliminating the secret enrichment program.

The administration decided otherwise -- simply to exert pressure against North Korea rather than engage, arguing that to do otherwise would be to "reward bad behavior" and pointing out that Pyongyang had broken the previous agreement. The day after our meeting at the White House U.S. officials asked South Korea and Japan, our allies in implementing the Agreed Framework, to agree to stop the shipment of U.S.-financed oil that was on its way from Singapore to North Korea under the terms of the Agreed Framework. The allies advised against this, arguing that this could prompt Pyongyang to respond with dangerous measures, including restarting its frozen nuclear weapons program. But on November 14 U.S. representatives, using heavy pressure, persuaded the allies to accept and announce a halt to future oil shipments, although the current oil shipment was permitted to proceed.

The oil tanker Sun River docked at the North Korean port of Nampo on November 18 with 42,886 tons of heavy oil, but due to problems at the port the last drops were not unloaded until December 10. Once that was done, North Korea reacted with astonishing swiftness to restore its drive for nuclear weapons. On December 12 Pyongyang announced it was restarting the 5 megawatt nuclear reactor that had been shut down in compliance with the Agreed Framework. Nine days later it began cutting the metal seals and disabling surveillance cameras placed by the IAEA inspectors at the reactor to assure that North Korea was not working to produce nuclear weapons. Shortly thereafter they did the same at the nearby fuel storage pond, reactor site and plutonium separation plant. North Korea then announced that it had withdrawn from the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the first nation ever to do so in the history of the accord. Then it expelled the IAEA inspectors. U.S. spy satellites observed the movement of fuel rods to the separation plant, where they could potentially be processed into enough plutonium for five or six nuclear weapons.

The Bush administration was reluctant to deal with these dramatic events. For one thing, the usual disputes between supporters and opponents of negotiations emerged in Washington. Another reason for Bush's reticence was the overwhelming priority being given to preparations for the invasion of Iraq. The issue of nuclear weapons programs in North Korea -- which were known to be far more advanced that those alleged to be in Iraq -- would have been a major distraction and potentially a serious blow to the administration's Iraq strategy. Nonetheless, it was impossible to do nothing in the face of North Korea's nuclear breakout. In early January Bush proposed to his aides that North Korea's neighbors should also be involved in crafting a solution. Thus the idea was born of what later became the six-party talks.

First there was a three-way meeting of the U.S., North Korea and China sponsored by the Chinese in Beijing in April 2003. Then in August 2003 there was the first of the six- party talks involving South Korea, Japan and Russia as well as the original three. Two other rounds of six-party talks were held in February 2004 and June 2004. Only in June 2004 were there significant moves to close the very large gap between the United States and North Korea. If we think of the two sides as being about a foot apart, then each moved about one inch toward the other. The direction was encouraging, but in July, after first welcoming the U.S. June proposals, the North Koreans turned highly critical and began distancing themselves from the six party talks.

In the meantime, Pyongyang had begun denying that it had a highly enriched uranium program or that its officials had ever said so. As of this writing, the DPRK continues to deny it, presenting a very difficult hurdle for the six-party talks or any other means of negotiating a settlement.

On February 10, 2005, North Korea publicly declared for the first time that it had fabricated nuclear weapons "for self- defense" and indefinitely suspended its participation in the six party talks. On March 31 the DPRK declared itself to be "a full-fledged nuclear weapons state" and demanded to be recognized as such by other nations. By then it was producing plutonium as rapidly as possible. Taking into account the fissionable material for one or two weapons that had "possibly" been hidden away before the 1994 Agreed Framework, U.S. intelligence agencies estimated that Pyongyang possessed the plutonium for at least eight nuclear weapons, and perhaps had fabricated the weapons themselves.[4] North Korea, moreover, was well on its way to producing many more. The location and state of its uranium enrichment program, which North Korea denies ever having or having acknowledged, is unknown.

None of North Korea's neighbors wants to see a nuclear-armed North Korea. However, each has his own national interests in North Korea, and each of those national interests is a bit different.

South Korea, as noted earlier, is a democratic country now and it recently experienced a major demographic and political shift. Most of its electorate is under the age of 40 and does not remember the Korean War. Especially after a summit meeting in 2000 between President Kim Dae Jung of South Korea and Kim Jung-Il, younger Koreans tend to see the North less as a threat than as a long-separated part of their country which needs help. A student in her 20s whom I interviewed not long ago compared North Korea to "a distant cousin whom you meet at a family reunion. You know you may not want much to do with him, but you can't get rid of him. He's part of your kin." That's a far cry from the way that South Korea has viewed North Korea during most of its existence. There is strong support in the South for economic and political engagement engagement with the North.

When the dividing line was drawn in 1945, Colonel Rusk and his associate drew it just north of the capital city so that Seoul would be part of the American sector. But the dividing line remains so close that North Koreans artillery, to say nothing of its rockets, could easily reach the South Korean capital, which contains about one third of South Korea's entire population of 46 million people. North Korea has often threatened that should it be attacked, it would train its guns on Seoul in retaliation. The South Koreans fear any outbreak of hostilities that would wreak death and destruction, but most of them believe that outsiders, especially the United States, are more likely to initiate such a conflagration than is North Korea.

For the Chinese, North Korean nuclear weapons do not pose much of a security threat. China has had nuclear weapons since 1964 and it is a huge and powerful country. Its principal concern is the potential spread of nuclear weapons to South Korea and especially to Japan and above all to Taiwan. Those developments the Chinese would regard with the utmost seriousness. While they don't want to see nuclear weapons on the Korean peninsula, at the same time they do not want to see any kind of radical or destabilizing change in North Korea. They would like the DPRK to continue as a buffer state on their borders. The Chinese -- like the South Koreans -- don't want tens or hundreds of thousands, potentially millions of refugees, most of whom would be impoverished people, pouring across their border from North Korea. So the Chinese have a stake in solving the nuclear weapons program, but they are likely to oppose any pressures severe enough to threaten the existence of the North Korean regime.

The Japanese have an unusual and changing situation. Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi flew to North Korea and met Kim Jung Il in September 2002, shortly before Secretary Kelly and his party went there, and again in May 2004. He would like to see a negotiated agreement. He urged

President Bush, at the recent summit meeting of the G-8, to engage with North Korea. Nonetheless, the Japanese have a very serious political and ethical problem because North Korea kidnapped a number of Japanese citizens in the 1970s and early 1980s. Kim in September 2002 surprisingly acknowledged this and apologized to Japan, hoping that this would make possible full diplomatic relations and a large-scale aid Japanese aid package. But in fact, because the North Koreans could not account for all those who had been kidnapped, the Koizumi- Kim initiative actually inflamed the issue. While the Japanese government wants to see a solution to the nuclear issue in the interest of its security, it is at the moment in a very antagonistic posture with regard to North Korea.

The Russians have had a long experience with North Korea -- after all, it was Russia which in a sense created North Korea. Yet today's Russian diplomats are in a poor position to do anything much about the nuclear problem. They are mostly bystanders, but they have been mostly cooperative and constructive bystanders, on the whole.

The United States, in fact, probably fears a North Korean nuclear program more than any other party. Despite some worst-case reports, experts whom I regard believe the North Koreans are far from having a nuclear warhead that would fit on a reliable long-range missile capable of striking U.S. territory. The grave U.S. concern is a residue of the 9/11 terroristic attack: that North Korea, which has sold ballistic missiles to Middle Eastern countries of which the U.S. disapproves, could provide nuclear materials, know how or even a nuclear weapon to a state or non-state actor, such as Al Qaeda, which is unfriendly to the United States.

From the start, the Bush administration has been divided between those who want to negotiate seriously with North Korea as the least bad alternative and those who believe that negotiations would simply strengthen an evil regime that they hope to bring down through external pressures. The result in the first Bush administration was policy stalemate and irresolution. The administration spoke officially of a negotiated settlement, but it did not do much to bring this about. There was little urgency in its handling of the issue, which was often sidelined in order not to interfere with the higher priority issues concerning Iraq. On several occasions, the drive for serious diplomacy was stymied by those in the administration who opposed compromises with North Korea.

President Bush himself had expressed both these tendencies. He lumped North Korea with Iraq and Iran in his "axis of evil," and told Bob Woodward in an August 2002 interview that "I loathe Kim Jong Il!" In April 2005 he went out of his way to call Kim "a tyrant." Yet he has also, sometimes on thes ame occasion, emphasized his determination to solve the North Korean nuclear problem through diplomacy.

There are no easy or cost free solutions to this problem. Consequently there is a strong temptation in some quarters of the administration to temporize with the issue, placing it in a category of too difficult to handle. However, time is running against such policies. North Korea is now working every day to produce additional plutonium. It is believed to be working on a highly enriched uranium project, which would provide it with even greater nuclear capability. The longer the issues remain unresolved, the greater the North Korean arsenal and the more difficult an acceptable resolution will be down the road.

I don't know the solution to this problem, but I think all of us know what the solution should not be: a military action which is devastating to the people of Korea on both sides of the 38th parallel and possibly to others in Northeast Asia. Having been a diplomatic correspondent for many years before my retirement from the Washington Post, my instinct is that the way to resolve international problems is to engage with one's opponents. The United States didn't like the leaders of the Soviet Union -- but we found ways to engage them. We didn't like the Chinese in the era before the 1970s, but we found ways to engage them also. I believe that ways can be found to seriously engage the

North Koreans, difficult as it might be. Whatever means are chosen to deal with it, the problem of nuclear weapons in the divided Korean peninsula is too dangerous to be left to fester.

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
Northeast Asia Peace and Security Project (napsnet-reply@nautilus.org)
Return to top
back to top

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