

Policy Forum 07-010: Kim Jong Il's Nuclear Ambitions



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Article by Nicholas Eberstadt

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I. Introduction

Nicholas Eberstadt, Henry Wendt Scholar in Political Economy at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), writes, "The Dear Leader and his team understand very well that the Six-Party 'denuclearization' farce now provides perfect international diplomatic cover for an unobstructed North Korean nuclear arms buildup. What the other parties in the talk do not seem to understand--or in the case of an increasingly weakened Bush Presidency, perhaps fear to face--is that the only

"solutions" to the North Korean nuclear crisis worthy of the name require a better class of dictator in Pyongyang."

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II. Article by Nicholas Eberstadt

- Kim Jong Il's Nuclear Ambitions
by Nicholas Eberstadt

What is the world's most worrisome and destabilizing nuclear-proliferation hotspot these days? By all appearances, it is the diplomatic table in Beijing where "Six-Party Talks" are episodically convened for negotiations on North Korean nuclear disarmament. Every time the international negotiators gather--or even threaten to gather--for another round of those deliberations, Pyongyang seems to take another fateful step toward complete and unrestrained nuclear breakout.

Recall: back in the summer of 2003, when the "Six-Party Talks" were being first planned, Pyongyang was still just a nuclear "suspect", coyly insisting on its right to hold what it would only call a "war deterrent".

Five Six-Party conferences later, there has been real progress: not in the negotiations, but in North Korea's nuclear weapons program. While the "denuclearization talks" lurched from one stalemated round into the next, Kim Jong Il diligently and methodically prepared the international community for the advent of nuclear-armed North Korean state.

First, he let it be known that the phrase "war deterrent" was actually just code-language for the "nukes" he intended to produce and stockpile. A little later, after a decent interval, his government declared it actually possessed them--and further stated that "these weapons" would be kept "for self-defense under any circumstances". Then, last fall, North Korea celebrated the run-up to the most recent Six-Party get-together with its first-ever attempted nuclear detonation (according to many reports, an only partially successful explosion of about half a kiloton's killing force).

You might think that the diplomatic sophisticates in charge of the "North Korean denuclearization talks" would have detected a pattern here by now. Apparently not. Today--well into the fourth year of phony dialogue about denuclearization--reports suggesting that Pyongyang may be readying a second nuclear test have been greeted by the other five governments in the "Six-Party Talks" with calls for Pyongyang to come back to the table for another negotiation session!

Perhaps most astonishing of all, one of the five governments now straining for another chance to coax Pyongyang into voluntary nuclear self-disarmament is Washington. Yes, this is the artist formerly known as the big, bad neo-con Bush Administration--ironically, the one and only actor in the Six-Party cast ever committed to pressing (as opposed to pleading) North Korea into non-proliferation compliance.

Over the past year, the Bush Administration's North Korean climb-down has been almost dizzying to watch. Gone are the days of "CVID"--the earlier watchword for the complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of North Korean nuclear programs upon which Washington was once insisting. And American diplomats no longer even talk of North Korea's HEU (highly enriched

uranium) program--the clandestine effort, in contravention of international pledges and obligations, whose public exposure by State Department officials in late 2002 originally triggered the proliferation drama still currently unfolding. Since North Korean officials now insist they do not have an HEU program--and never had one!--it would be undiplomatic to suggest otherwise at the table.

By the fifth round of Six-Party talks last month, the United States had been reduced to entreating North Korea for an "early harvest" from nuclear negotiations. Poor packaging aside (a metaphor implicitly reminding the Kim Jong Il regime about its inability to feed its people may not be ideal diplomatic salesmanship) the proposal was wanting in substance as well as form. The "early harvest" concept would have had the U.S. pledge economic aid (food, oil) and other benefits (including perhaps diplomatic recognition) in return for a provisional North Korean freeze of its plutonium facilities and a re-admission of nuclear inspectors.

In other words, the Bush Administration was proffering a zero-penalty return to the previous nuclear deals Pyongyang had flagrantly broken--but with additional new goodies, and a provisional free pass for any nukes produced since 2002, as sweeteners. With this overture, the Bush team embraced the very approach it had once mocked as weak-kneed, inconstant and 'Clintonesque'.

The North Korean side knows a cave-in when it sees one, and decided to mine Dubya's for all it was worth. They brushed aside the "early harvest" proposal as inadequate, demanding still more before they would even sit down to listen to new denuclearization offers: specifically, the release of \$24 million of Pyongyang's funds currently frozen in Macau's Banco Delta Asia (BDA) on suspicion of North Korean complicity in counterfeiting U.S. currency.

Pyongyang's unconcealed obsession over the past year with re-pocketing its Macau bag money--a paramount issue on its foreign agenda ever since the accounts were impounded in late 2005 by Macau banking authorities under U.S. Treasury scrutiny--can be explained diversely. Since the DPRK is in many respects a state-run criminal enterprise (reportedly replete with drug-running operations, and scams counterfeiting everything from US dollars to Marlboro cigarettes to Viagra), this may be seen as pure Goodfella fury at being stung by the very victims its own shakedown racket was supposed to be bilking. Or it may be that since the BDA seizures are practically the only penalties Pyongyang has suffered since its nuclear confrontation with the international community took off back in 2002 (thus far the UN sanctions enacted after last fall's nuke attempt are mere pinpricks), it wanted to make sure it had an absolutely risk-free economic playing field before kicking its nuclear game into overdrive.

Who can really know? At the end of the day, what matters is that when North Korea pressed, U.S. negotiators squirmed. Now there is an unseemly tug-of-war back in George Bush's capital, with State Department luminaries wheedling their Treasury counterparts to let up, just a bit, on the financial war against global terror--to relent in Treasury's international campaign against counterfeiting and money-laundering by hostile entities just enough so Foggy Bottom could lure a charter member of the Axis of Evil back to the Six-Party table: with a multi-million dollar concession.

Word around Washington is this inter-Administration battle is heated--and that its outcome is still uncertain.

If Pyongyang does get its BDA funds back, and the past is any prologue, Kim Jong Il will pocket the money, without thanks, and then go on to detonate another nuke at the time and place of his own choosing. From Kim Jong Il's standpoint, another test will not "poison the atmosphere" for future talks: quite the contrary, by demonstrating the North Korea has workable nuclear weaponry, it would raise the Western bids at the next round of "denuclearization" talks to a new and much more attractive level.

The Dear Leader and his team understand very well that the Six-Party "denuclearization" farce now provides perfect international diplomatic cover for an unobstructed North Korean nuclear arms buildup. What the other parties in the talk do not seem to understand--or in the case of an increasingly weakened Bush Presidency, perhaps fear to face--is that the only "solutions" to the North Korean nuclear crisis worthy of the name require a better class of dictator in Pyongyang.

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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