

Policy Forum 02-22A: All Deals Are Off? Contending with a Nuclear North Korea

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All Deals Are Off? Contending with a Nuclear North Korea

by Henry Sokolski

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I. Introduction

The essay below is by Henry Sokolski, Executive Director of the Washington-based Nonproliferation Policy Education Center. Sokolski asserts that given recent events reviving the 1994 Agreed Framework is unwise, and rather North Korea must pay a price for its violations. Moreover, North Korea must also hand over to the IAEA all the nuclear technology and hardware it illicitly imported. Finally, the United States and its allies should give up the idea of renewing or retaining the 1994 deal, and apply more direct pressure to North Korea.

This piece was originally published in the National Review On-line on November 19, 2002.

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II. Essay by Henry Sokolski

All Deals Are Off? Contending with a Nuclear North Korea
By Henry Sokolski
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With North Korea's official admission Sunday that it has atomic weapons and its insistence it has a right to them, you'd think talk of reviving the 1994 deal that failed to keep Pyongyang from going nuclear would be dead. You'd think this. But you'd be wrong.

In fact, analysts and officials in the U.S. and South Korea - eager to head off this common-sense conclusion - immediately went out of their way to excuse Pyongyang's latest announcements. North Korea's admission Sunday that it had nuclear weapons, they insist, was a ruse or a transcription mistake. Its claim (reiterated on Monday) that it had a right to such weapons was portrayed as a plea to keep the 1994 deal (and talks for other deals) alive.

Clearly, for Washington's Korea hands, the need to continue the 1994 understanding has become a major article of faith. Just last week, Bush responded to Pyongyang's earlier confession that it was secretly enriching uranium for bombs by suspending further U.S. oil shipments to Pyongyang as required under the 1994 deal. Rather than accept this decision as the beginning of the end for the 1994 agreement, though, U.S. diplomats insisted that the White House was simply trying to get North Korea to open up to inspections and that the 1994 deal itself - or, at least, parts of it - would likely be revived.

Of course, the deal would have to be slightly modified. Pyongyang would have to "verifiably" freeze and dismantle its uranium and plutonium production plants and ship out of North Korea the plutonium-laden spent reactor fuel it has on hand. But assuming North Korea was open to such arrangements, America's best course, these Asia hands argue, would be to resume fuel oil shipments and address Pyongyang's broader economic and security concerns.

Keep in mind that even before its Sunday announcement, Pyongyang had twice broken its Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) pledge not to covertly make nuclear weapons as well as its International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) pledge to declare all of its nuclear assets. North Korea also violated its 1992 promise to South Korea not to build a reprocessing or enrichment plant and then broke its 1994 pledge to Washington to uphold all these pledges.

What, then, could possess anyone to revive the 1994 deal? Simple: Continued, misguided fear. Specifically, Pyongyang, we are told, might yet breakout of the freeze that the 1994 deal imposed on

its plutonium production. Without this restraint, Pyongyang, according to some estimates, would have 100 bombs by now and be producing 30 or more nuclear weapons worth of plutonium annually.

This sounds pretty bad. U.S. and Chinese intelligence analysts figure Pyongyang has between one and five nuclear bombs. If North Korea was to get another 30 a year, wouldn't it be worth trying to prevent?

Sure, if we could, but there are two problems with this analysis. First, there is no way today Pyongyang could make this many plutonium bombs per year. In fact, it would take North Korea at least another four to five years before it could produce 30 weapons worth of plutonium annually. Second, short of containing Pyongyang and pushing regime change - two good ideas the U.S. needs to get back to - North Korea is not going to "verifiably" self-disarm no matter what we offer.

Why would it take Pyongyang so long to make 30 bombs worth of plutonium? Because first it would have to complete two unfinished reactors whose construction has been frozen since 1994. To finish this work would take at least another 36 to 48 months. After this, North Korea would have to operate the reactors for additional year. Pyongyang could creep out with more plutonium bombs, then, but any major, immediate plutonium breakout is hardly in the cards.

Surely, the last thing we should do is to let this long-term threat immediately drive us to renewed groveling. Instead, we should let North Korea find its own reasons to hold up its plutonium production. It's certainly hard to see how restarting production would please Pyongyang's key backers - Russia and China. Neither state could be keen on seeing North Korea push Tokyo or Seoul into closer military cooperation with the U.S. Nor do they have any appetite for a remilitarized Japan. Pyongyang, meanwhile, is unlikely to secure any additional help from Tokyo or Seoul - its two most appeasing neighbors - if it pushes its nuclear or missile programs much further.

As for inspecting North Korea into disarmament - as we are attempting to do with Iraq - good luck. There are 12,000 caves in North Korea, almost any of which could contain some portion of Pyongyang's secret uranium enrichment program or a covert plutonium effort.

Also, unlike Iraq - where inspectors conducted intrusive inspections from 1991 through 1998 and have a base-line inventory to work from - there has only been one routine nuclear inspection of North Korea's declared facilities and that was conducted over a decade ago. As a result, any North Korean declaration today would be virtually impossible to validate. One might call on Pakistan,

Russia, and China to detail what nuclear technology and hardware they allowed North Korea to import. But without such details - and a lot of them - we have little or no idea of what to look for or where.

What, then, should we do?

First, we should call on the nations who helped North Korea violate the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) to tell us and the IAEA all they know about what Pyongyang received. In this vein, we also need to make North Korea pay a separate penalty for violating the NPT: We should at least demand that Pyongyang hand over to the IAEA all the nuclear technology and hardware it illicitly imported.

Second, the U.S. and its allies need to step up their defense efforts to keep Pyongyang from calculating any advantage in escalating its own military activities.

Finally, and most important, the U.S. and its allies need to put a spotlight on the tyrannical, hostile character of the North Korea regime - especially its violation of its citizens' human rights - much as

Ronald Reagan successfully did against a much more fearsome nuclear power, the Soviet Union. This might not renew the 1994 deal. But faced with a nuclear North Korea, the U.S. and its friends would be better off with no deal rather than trying to revive a bad one.

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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