Policy Forum 03-27A: Double Trouble?

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Double Trouble?

By William C. Potter and Phillip C. Saunders

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I. Introduction

William Potter, director of the Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Monterey Institute of International Studies and Phillip Saunders, director of the East Asia Nonproliferation Program at the Center for Nonproliferation Studies, argue that given the current war in Iraq, North Korean efforts

to potentially escalate the crisis carry a high risk of misperception and unintended consequences. The potential for major miscalculations by both the United States and the DPRK is compounded by lack of agreement in Washington about what the United States seeks from North Korea and what it should be prepared to pay. The administration's failure to draw "red lines" about proscribed behavior means that North Korea can only guess what actions might prompt a forceful U.S. response.

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II. Essay by William C. Potter and Phillip C. Saunders

"Double Trouble?" By William C. Potter and Phillip C. Saunders
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As the war in Iraq continues, officials in Washington must contend with a potentially even more dangerous crisis on the Korean peninsula. Although the Bush administration would prefer to deal with these challenges sequentially, it is unlikely to have that luxury. The United States must anticipate intensified North Korean nuclear and missile brinkmanship. Starting negotiations now could prevent North Korean nuclear escalation and avoid the risk of fighting wars on two fronts.

Since the United States confronted Pyongyang about its secret uranium enrichment program in October 2002, North Korea has kicked out International Atomic Energy Agency inspectors, announced its withdrawal from the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, restarted a nuclear reactor that had been frozen under the 1994 Agreed Framework, and reportedly begun moving spent fuel rods to a reprocessing facility that can produce plutonium. It also recently sought to intercept a U.S. reconnaissance aircraft--possibly with the intention of taking the crew hostage--and has tested naval cruise missiles three times.

One interpretation is that these steps are intended to bring the United States to the negotiating table in order to obtain U.S. recognition of North Korean sovereignty, formal security assurances, and economic assistance. North Korea may believe it can get a better deal by escalating the crisis while the United States is preoccupied with Iraq. In this case, North Korea may chose to resume ballistic missile tests, conduct military exercises, or initiate a small-scale military incident in order to increase pressure on Washington to meet its demands. Pyongyang would probably refrain from more provocative actions that it believes might precipitate a U.S. military response.

On the other hand, North Korea may have decided that it is only a matter of time before Pyongyang becomes the next target of the U.S. preemptive strategy. In this case, accelerating nuclear weapons production and demonstrating the capability to target U.S. forces and allies with ballistic missiles makes sense from the perspective of deterring a U.S. attack. If this reflects Kim Jong Il's current calculus, one should expect North Korea to exploit Washington's fixation on Iraq to advance its nuclear weapons and missile capabilities as quickly as possible.

Under this scenario, North Korea would resume plutonium reprocessing while the United States is heavily engaged in Iraq, with the goal of producing material for as many as six nuclear weapons within a few months. It would likely seek to deter a possible U.S. strike against its nuclear facilities by using a flight test of a Nodong medium-range missile to demonstrate its ability to inflict massive damage on South Korea and Japan, as well as on U.S. troops based in those countries. Pyongyang would probably also have plans in place to retaliate against U.S. targets with conventional and/or

special operations forces if the United States launches a pre-emptive attack.

Regardless of North Korea's ultimate intentions, DPRK efforts to escalate the crisis carry a very high risk of misperception and unintended consequences. The potential for major miscalculations by both states--who in the best of times have great difficulty understanding one another--is compounded by lack of agreement in Washington about what the United States seeks from North Korea and what it should be prepared to pay. The administration's failure to draw "red lines" about proscribed behavior means that North Korea can only guess what actions might prompt a forceful U.S. response.

This ambiguity increases the likelihood of inadvertent escalation into a military conflict if North Korea unintentionally pushes past an implicit but unarticulated U.S. "red line." It also increases the risk that U.S. preoccupation with Iraq may allow North Korea to resume a nuclear weapons program that would significantly enhance its military capability, threaten regional security, and damage the nuclear nonproliferation regime.

Both military action and delay carry high risks for the United States. Any U.S. military strike almost certainly would result in major North Korean reprisals, possibly including a conventional attack on Seoul. U.S. discounting of the nuclear crisis, however, could give Pyongyang time to attain new options such as a nuclear weapons test, deployment of operational nuclear arms, and exports of fissile material or even a complete nuclear weapon.

The United States should avoid these risks by immediately beginning bilateral talks with North Korea. The war in Iraq provides a justification for the Bush administration to make a tactical retreat from its unproductive Korean policy. Instead, Washington should test Pyongyang's intentions by exploring whether a deal could verifiably dismantle North Korea's nuclear weapons program.

Bush administration officials fear that bilateral negotiations would produce intense diplomatic pressure on Washington to accept a flawed deal. But a multilateral effort also is doomed as long as key countries such as South Korea, China, and Russia remain unwilling to exert pressure on North Korea.

The United States would gain several advantages by initiating bilateral negotiations with North Korea. By making a verifiable freeze on North Korean reprocessing activity a condition for U.S. participation, it could retard Pyongyang's nuclear weapons program and buy time to resolve the situation in Iraq. In return, the United States might pledge not to attack North Korea while negotiations are underway. This approach also would ease the growing rift between Washington and its allies in the region, making it easier for South Korea and Japan to join the United States in a common policy toward North Korea.

If negotiations fail to reach an acceptable agreement or if North Korea refuses an offer of direct talks, the United States would be better positioned to win international support for a tougher approach in the future. Finally, ongoing negotiations would enable the United States to regain the diplomatic initiative while reducing North Korea's ability to escalate the crisis.

One must assume that North Korea will exploit an invasion of Iraq to its full advantage. Although the United States cannot prevent North Korean hostilities, it can reduce their likelihood -- and the potential risk of fighting two wars simultaneously -- by immediately agreeing to bilateral negotiations.

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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