Policy Forum 04-22A: Kim Jong Il’s April 2004 Visit To China

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Kim Jong Il's April 2004 Visit To China

by Mark Caprio

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I. Introduction

In his essay, Mark Caprio, a specialist on Japan-Korea Relations and professor at Rikkyo University, asks the question "Will North Korea follow Libya's example and renounce its nuclear weapons programs?" Consequently, Caprio proposes that the United States must take the initiative to create the conciliatory atmosphere needed to nurture peaceful change rather than anticipate North Korea following the path of Libya. A plan that addresses the needs and interests of the North Korean state and by extension the peace and security of Northeast Asia, offers a better chance of securing North Korean cooperation in disclosure and disarmament of its nuclear arms programs, if, in fact, these weapons do indeed exist.

II. Essay by Mark Caprio

"Nuclear Dominos: Will North Korea Follow Libya's Lead?"
by Mark Caprio, Rikkyo University

The Libyan Foreign Ministry's December 19, 2003 "Statement" outlining its plan to "get rid of [weapons of mass destruction] materials, equipment and programs, and to become totally free of internationally banned weapons" prompted some to ponder whether North Korea might be next.{ 1 } Will the Northeast Asian "rogue state" join the Middle East "rogue state" in renouncing its nuclear weapons programs? The Japanese weekly magazine Aera questioned whether Kim Jong Il would follow the cooperative path of Muammar Kaddafi, or continue along the confrontational, and ultimately self-destructive, path that Saddam Hussein trod.{ 2 } In an interview with the Nikkei Press, Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage held out this offer: if they chose to voluntarily end their weapons programs like Libya, North Korea "would very rapidly find herself integrated into the vibrant community of East Asia."{ 3 } Neither of these two statements, however, address the central fact that the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, or the threat of their production, is the lone asset that the North Korean government under U.S. threat has as a bargaining chip in its effort to survive. Like other states, North Korea and Libya respond to international developments not as part of a "rogue alliance" but on the basis of analysis of their specific interests and needs.

Assumptions that Libya's decision to eliminate these weapons programs was influenced by what Armitage called "muscular multilateralism" -- the United States allying itself with friends and arming itself with sanctions to prod wayward states to move in a desired direction -- merits scrutiny. Many hold that the U.S.-Great Britain invasion and overthrow of the Hussein regime, and the eventual capture of its leader, cowed Kaddafi into what William Safire has called "pre-emptive surrender."{ 4 } The United States seeks a similar capitulation from North Korea to be achieved, if possible, through six-party negotiations.

The present Bush regime claims that the defeat of Iraq, and capture of its leader, is the felled domino that toppled one despot, and will humble other totalitarian regimes. There is, however, little reason to believe that the apparent Bush administration victory in Libya will lead other states, in particular North Korea, to halt nuclear development programs or discard their nuclear weapons. It remains necessary to subject the conditions of each state to close examination within a framework of understanding regional and global power relations.

As more of the story of Kaddafi's apparent capitulation emerges we gain a clearer understanding of the chain of events and calculations that led the Libyan leader to disclose the extent of his weapons programs. First it is important to note that attempts by Libya to cooperate predate not only the U.S. capture of Saddam Hussein, but also the U.S. preemptive attack on Iraq. In its Statement the Libyan Foreign Ministry pointed out that its weapons' experts have been holding talks with their British and

U.S. counterparts for some time. A Los Angeles Times editorial reports that for over a decade Libya has been trying to "trade its uncomfortable renegade status for international acceptance."{ 5 } These negotiations bore fruit in mid-1999 when Libya accepted responsibility for first the 1984 murder of Yvonne Fletcher, a British police officer at the Libyan embassy in London, and second the 1988 bombing of the Pan Am jetliner over Lockerbie, Scotland. It was around this time that the Libyan government first offered its illegal weapons programs for negotiation. In addition, its disdain for Al Qaeda allowed the Libyan government to quickly condemn the September 11 terrorist attacks, and actively cooperate in the United States war on terrorism. (Libyan Foreign Minister, Abdel-Rahman Shalqam, claims that his government began issuing warnings of Al Qaeda's threat in the 1980s.{ 6 }) Over the last decade Kaddafi, the former leader of the "rejectionist front" against Israel, has refrained from criticizing that state. Libya's Statement also clarified that it had recently showed U.S. and British officials materials useful for weapons' production, including centrifuges and containers for chemical materials; based on subsequent discussions it "decided on its free will" to end these programs. In short, the Libyan leader's 2003 decision to eliminate its weapons programs was part of a larger ambition to repair relations with the greater international community.

It is also important to clarify just what the Libyan government's December 2003 Statement promised, and what has transpired since. Libya did not admit to possession of weapons of mass destruction, still less nuclear weapons, only to having materials that could "lead to the production of internationally banned weapons." Since then it has handed over nuclear-related equipment, including about 4,000 castings for centrifuges needed to enrich uranium. It also promised to bring itself into compliance with various weapons-related agreements, such as the Missile Technology Control Regime control system, the nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), and regulations stipulated by the International Atomic Energy Agency.{ 7 } IAEA inspectors have since been allowed into the country to conduct inspections. To date they have found no completed weapons.

What has Libya gained in return? Although its Statement expressed its desire to see "a world enjoying security and peace," Libya has made it clear that its cooperation is contingent on its release from sanctions, opening the way to enable it to enlist international assistance in tapping its rich oil reserves. In April 1999, the United Nations suspended sanctions following Libya's surrender of the two Pan Am bombing suspects; it later lifted these sanctions in September 2003 following the conviction of one of the suspects. In July 1999, Great Britain restored diplomatic ties with Libya after it accepted responsibility for the murder of Yvonne Fletcher. The British government has since been active in encouraging other states to strengthen ties with the Middle Eastern state. The United States, however, quietly abstained from the United Nations vote to lift sanctions, and, in February 2004 it agreed to rescind minor sanctions -- restrictions on travel to Libya and activity by American oil companies in the country. It has yet to rescind the 1986 Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (which it renewed for another six months in January 2004), and it maintains Libya's name on the list of states supporting terrorism. Release from sanctions would allow certain oil companies to return to Libya to develop its gas resources. The added investment would also help Libya improve its economic conditions, and control the potential threat of Islamic fundamentalism to Kaddafi's rule. Recently, the Royal Dutch/Shell Group signed a preliminary agreement with a potential value of up to $1 billion, to claim one of an estimated 180 oil concessions that the country is prepared to distribute.

Although reluctant to meet Libya's demands, the Bush administration has not shied away from advertising this success story to fit its war on terrorism agenda. In his 2004 State of the Union address, the president contrasted twelve years of U.S. failure to negotiate a deal with Iraq against its success after but nine months of intense negotiation with Libya. This gross distortion of the facts reflects the desperation felt by the Bush White House: unable to find Iraqi weapons it uses another "rogue" state's disarmament to justify its illegal war. This also suggests why the U.S. finally appears to be thawing to a disarmament offer that the Libyan government made four years ago.

Such examples of voluntary weapon disclosure and destruction illustrate the value that states attribute to possessing nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction, as well as certain circumstances under which they might be willing to scrap these programs. We should examine these cases with an eye to learning more about the possibilities for peaceful disarmament, and the reduction of tensions, rather than to serve a narrow political agenda. Libya's Statement lists factors unrelated to U.S. actions in Iraq: it was the "international climate that prevailed during the Cold War," along with Middle East tension, that forced it to create these weapons programs in the first place; it tacitly suggested that assurances by the U.S. and Great Britain of its peace and security encouraged the state to discard these programs at this time.

Examining the situation in a broader perspective helps us to understand that these weapons programs could also have proven to be a political liability to Libya. Knowledge of their existence would have placed yet another heavy burden on the state's ambition to have lifted the sanctions imposed as penalty for terrorist activities. Libya's forthrightness in first admitting to having the hitherto clandestine programs, and then declaring its willingness to allow IAEA inspections, sent an important message of willingness to enter serious negotiations.

Others have suggested that the Libyan government was able to make its disclosure because it had nothing but a vision (and a failed one at that) to report. After conducting initial inspections IAEA director Mohamed Elbaradei concluded that the Libyans were "very much at an early state" of this process.{ 8 } The Bush administration's estimate that the Libyan nuclear program was much closer to completion may justify its reluctance to rescind all U.S. sanctions against Libya; according to nuclear specialist David Albright, however, here again it distorts the facts:{ 9 } while the Libyans had a rather large cache of centrifuges, they lacked the rotors needed to produce the highly enriched uranium to make a bomb. One might also question whether Libya could generate the power needed to enrich uranium. Further cooperation on the part of the Libyan government is likely to be predicated on similar cooperation from the United States. Indeed, Libya announced that its incremental payments of the remaining $6 million in compensation to each family of the Pan Am bombing victims hinges on the U.S. first lifting sanctions ($4 million), and then removing the state from its list of terrorist supporting states ($2 million) by May 12, 2004, exactly eight months after the United Nations rescinded its sanctions.

The Bush administration's coercive response to certain states that it suspects maintain illegal weapons programs might have encouraged Libya's decision. If seen in this light, however, it could just as easily come to haunt the Libyan leader. Reform-minded leaders in targeted states have learned that responding positively to United States demands places them between a rock and a hard place, as the conservative Spanish government recently discovered: promoting change risks their opponents characterizing them as Washington lackeys; maintaining their nuclear status quo invites criticism, sanctions, and (in the worst case scenario) military attack, by the U.S. and its allies. Concern that the result of the announcement might destabilize the Kaddafi regime, now its partner in negotiation, provides reason for the U.S. to accept Libya's decision quietly, and cease to trumpet it as a victory produced by force or threat.

South Africa's disclosure offers another oft-cited case of voluntary disclosure and disposal of nuclear weapons. Here again, the disclosure and its decision to destroy its hitherto clandestine nuclear weapons program assisted the state in its bid to reenter the international community. Like Libya, South Africa's disclosure came just at the time it was attempting to eliminate a major barrier that had long blocked its participation in numerous international institutions -- its apartheid policies. Furthermore, its war with neighboring Angola having ended, the state no longer felt it necessary to possess these weapons. Finally, the minority white government, fearful of the soon to be installed majority black government, was determined to denuclearize before turning power over to the new

regime. Again, intentions to destroy were nurtured by an atmosphere that encouraged disclosure thus allowing the government to work cooperatively with the international community to attain this goal.{ 10 }

While the circumstances surrounding these states' decision to disclose and destroy weapons programs were quite different, the common denominator in both cases was the relatively favorable domestic and international conditions within which Libya and South Africa existed at the time. Both states also linked the decision to other issues -- terrorist activities and apartheid -- to enlist support at an international level. And finally, both possessed a commodity in high demand throughout the world -- Libyan oil and South African diamonds. These factors encouraged a hospitable response by the international community to their overtures to disclose and disarm. The influential U.S. oil industry, for example, has actively lobbied its government to rescind the remaining sanctions held against Libya. That is, in contrast to North Korea, both states had much to lose had their weapons programs been discovered, and much to gain by demonstrating cooperation.

Iraq, on the other hand, presents a case of a state in possession of a global demand -- oil -- that failed to reach compromise with the United States and thus endured invasion and occupation. Up until 1990 Iraq had been one of the United States' more reliable allies in the Middle East, particularly after the Shah of Iran was overthrown in 1979. The United States encouraged Iraq's war with Iran, and turned a blind eye when it used chemical weapons in this war and later against its Kurdish minority. The U.S. bombing of Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait, however, failed to oust Saddam Hussein. Regime change by force thus became a priority of a second Bush administration staffed by holdovers from the previous one. Iraq attempted to cooperate by allowing for inspections and destroying its illegal weapons in the late 1990s. The constant threat of a second attack by U.S. forces offered the Saddam regime no reasonable incentive for it to divulge the extent of its suspected weapons programs in the months leading up to the March 2003 invasion, had they existed in the first place. Instead, the United States fabricated a case of the state's "imminent threat" and a doctrine justifying preemptive strike, and unleashed a brutal attack upon an Iraq whose military had been steadily weakened by U.S.-British aerial attack and embargo. Clearly the atmosphere here, as in the case of North Korea, lacked the incentives needed to encourage cooperation.

The U.S. conciliatory response to verified Pakistani sales of nuclear materials and technology to Libya, Iran, and North Korea -- it recently honored the state with "major ally" status -- illustrates the range of U.S. responses to nuclearization, compared to its harsh response to suspicions of Iraqi and North Korean weapons possession. In short, the oft-stated U.S. commitment to halting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction is clearly colored by the nature of U.S. political relations with a state in question, as demonstrated by the very different responses to Israel and Pakistan on the one hand and Iraq and North Korea on the other.

North Korea shared with Iraq a history of having engaged the United States in unresolved wars. While the Korean War was fought over a half century ago, in the absence of a peace treaty the adversaries to this day remain technically at war. The U.S. has repeatedly threatened North Korea with nuclear annihilation while U.S.-imposed trade sanctions have long blocked North Korean hopes for economic recovery. These facts are rarely alluded to as the U.S. demands that North Korea fully disclose and dismantle its nuclear -- military and energy -- programs. Indeed, U.S. policy ambitions, notably those of the present Bush administration, appear directed toward encouraging the state's collapse and regime change, rather than its economic recovery.

North Korea, some argue, is a far greater military threat than was Iraq in recent years, having the potential to launch scud missiles in the direction of Seoul and Tokyo. With its economy in shambles and its people starving, however, one would assume that it would be in the interests of the North Korean state to rid the country of these politically and financially taxing weapons; in fact, however,

it has been precisely U.S. suspicions of their existence that has secured North Korea a seat at negotiation tables. Like Libya, North Korea has delivered a consistent message signaling its willingness to fully disclose, freeze, and eventually end its nuclear weapons programs, if an atmosphere conducive to such risk taking is nurtured -- that is, if the U.S. agrees to forge a nonaggression agreement, to refrain from interfering in its economic development, and to negotiate with it a treaty of normalization.

Why does the United States now refuse to engage North Korea in a way that has secured that state's cooperation in the past, as well as prompting Libya's recent decision to disclose its weapons programs? Mistrust is, of course, one critical factor. The United States questions whether the North Korean government will honor its side of any agreement it makes and insists on intrusive verification measures to ensure this. Accusing the state of engaging in enriched uranium development (a charge that the North Koreans have denied), the Bush administration demands that the North Koreans halt all nuclear programs -- peaceful as well as military -- before it will consider direct negotiations. The United States, on the other hand, has given North Korea little reason for trust since it decided to divide the Korean peninsula in August 1945. Its nuclear threat encouraged North Korea to seek to obtain this capacity in the first place; at present it contributes to North Korea's unwillingness to disclose fully the extent of its programs. Having survived the past half-century under these conditions the U.S. victory in Iraq can only strengthen Kim Jong Il's conviction that the risks of disarmament in the face of U.S. threats are high. Yet the evidence of the last decade is nevertheless one of a willingness to negotiate, when it felt that its needs were being respected.

Over the past decade North Korea has on several occasions cooperated with the U.S. and its allies. It responded positively to steps taken by the first Bush administration: North Korea signed the 1991 non-nuclear agreement with South Korea following the U.S. president's decision to remove all nuclear weapons from the southern half of the peninsula. Most important, it welcomed the provisions of the 1994 Agreed Framework which provided, in addition to answers to its energy problems, a road map to normalization with the U.S., despite the agreement requiring the state to take steps that exceeded requirements stipulated by international agreements such as the NPT. In 1998, it allowed U.S. officials to conduct intrusive inspections at Kumchang'ni, an underground site falsely suspected of housing a nuclear facility. Soon after it froze testing of its long-range missile program until 2003, a promise that it has kept despite the United States reneging on the agreement's fundamental condition -- that the U.S. continue negotiations with the North Korean government. Since 2001, it has put forth a number of proposals to conclude the present standoff that would disclose and end its more threatening weapons programs -- nuclear, biological, and chemical -- along with its long-range missile development and sales. To date its efforts have done little to appease the Bush administration, which continues to blame North Korea for breaking an agreement that two U.S. administrations displayed little interest in honoring.

North Korea also participated in productive dialogue with both South Korea and Japan. It has cooperated with South Korea in connecting transportation routes that cross the demilitarized zone, and has participated in a number of North-South cabinet-level meetings to resolve differences that have separated the two Koreas for over a half-century. In 2002, it took steps to settle the major problem blocking diplomatic normalization with Japan -- the abductee issue. Its recent offer to resolve this difference by having the abducted Japanese return to P'yongyang to meet with their family members can be interpreted as a face-saving measure for North Korea, and a way for the Japanese government to honorably resolve the impasse over the abductees and their families. North Korea can be criticized for stubbornly refusing to take the extra step needed to strengthen its chances for success, and for backpedaling at critical times that require forward motion. The United States, however, has successfully contained independent attempts by Japan and South Korea to resolve their differences with North Korea, while it repeats its unreasonable demand that the North

Korean government agree to complete, verifiable, and irreversible dismantlement of all nuclear programs before the U.S. will negotiate its needs and interests.

North Korea's demands should be familiar: they constitute fundamental national rights that receive protection in many international treaties, including the NPT that North Korea recently left: national security and uninhibited economic development. Its request that the United States negotiate with it a nonaggression agreement has been a staple of all U.S.-North Korea discussions. How, North Korean officials question, can we cement a friendly relationship while we remain at war? The response of the United States is simply that it has no intention of invading North Korea. Having faced a U.S. nuclear threat for the better part of a half-century, such casual remarks do little to assure the North Koreans of U.S. sincerity. The mistrust that has thickened since the inauguration of the present Bush administration prevents the North Korea from taking an initial step of fully disclosing its nuclear programs, much less freezing or eliminating them. In short, an atmosphere conducive to North Korean risk-taking, one in which there was credible promise of reciprocity, simply does not exist at this time.

Lacking a commodity in demand, such as oil or diamonds, North Korea possesses little of value to offer the international community to barter its cooperation, and much to lose by giving up its nuclear card, unless it is confident that this concession would strengthen its national security. The United States would also lose a number of its cards by North Korean disclosure and disarmament of its weapons programs, which might explain its reluctance to engage the state in negotiation. The loss of this threat would bring into question the necessity of its continuing to maintain 100,000 troops in the Northeast Asian region; it might cause its allies in the region to reconsider their pledges to deploy the missile defense system that the U.S. has been pressuring them to accept. A diminished U.S. regional influence could encourage closer regional economic and security ties, rather than the regional arms race that many argue a U.S. military withdrawal would provoke. The potential loss of this influence would severely compromise U.S. economic and security interests in the Northeast Asian region.

Maintaining the status quo -- using the North Korean threat to maintain dependency relations with Japan and South Korea -- sustains super-charged regional relations with high potential for war. The United States, as North Korea's primary threat, must take the initiative to create the conciliatory atmosphere needed to nurture peaceful change. Rather than projecting engagement with North Korea as "rewarding bad behavior" or "succumbing to nuclear blackmail," the Bush administration should acknowledge the progress that tit-for-tat diplomacy has made in the past, and its necessity for nurturing the conciliatory atmosphere that two states harboring a profound mistrust toward each other require to peacefully resolve their differences. Rather than anticipation of it following in a fellow "rogue" state's footsteps, a plan that addresses the needs and interests of the North Korean state and by extension the peace and security of Northeast Asia, offers a better chance of securing North Korean cooperation in disclosure and disarmament of its nuclear arms programs, if, in fact, these weapons do indeed exist.

Notes

1 . The author would like to thank Mark Selden and Geoff Gunn for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

2 . "Kaddafi ni minarai 'k?u' ka" [A "submission" learned from Kaddafi?"], Aera (January 12, 2004): 19-20.

3 . "Armitage Urges North Korea to Follow Example of Libya on WMD." Carried on December 24, 2003 by the United States Information, Department of State homepage (

http://usembassymalaysia.org.my/wf/wf1224_armitage.html).

4 . "Qaddafi's Surrender, Bush's Success," International Herald Tribune, December 23, 2003.

5 . "Libya Seeks Global Acceptance," reprinted in the Daily Yomiuri, December 21, 2003.

6 . "Blair visits Libya, Continuing a Thaw," International Herald Tribune, March 26, 2004.

7 . Libya's "Statement" appeared in the December 21, 2003 issue of the Daily Yomiuri.

8 . "If the Bomb is so Easy to Make, Why Don't More Nations Have it? New York Times News of the Week in Review, January 4, 2004.

9 . "U.S. Wrong on Libya, Group Says," International Herald Tribune, March 26, 2004. The U.S. government has made this claim as late as March 15, 2004.

10 . See Mitchell Reiss' chapter on South Africa in his Bridled Ambitions: Why Countries Constrain their Nuclear Activities (Washington, D. C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995).

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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