

Policy Forum 03-39A: Last Chance To Avert A Korean Krakatoa

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Last Chance To Avert A Korean Krakatoa

by Peter Hayes

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I. Introduction

Given the pressures that could lead to armed conflict between the United States and the DPRK in the near future, Peter Hayes, Executive Director of the Nautilus Institute, outlines four scenarios that try to answer whether or not possibilities exist for a peaceful resolution between the United States and the DPRK before November, 2004. Hayes also addresses the questions: What are the strategic elements of such scenarios? What are the pitfalls? If the conflict spins out of control, in what ways could one push towards a peaceful outcome? This Op-Ed was based on the second annual Nautilus Institute US-DPRK Scenarios Workshop held in May 2003.

The full report can be found:

<https://nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/scenarios/DPRKscenarios2003.pdf>

II. Essay by Peter Hayes

"Last Chance To Avert A Korean Krakatoa"

by Peter Hayes, the Nautilus Institute

I believe that the DPRK is almost certain that the United States will not meet its key demands at the pending six-power talks in Beijing. Thus, the DPRK has little to lose by abandoning its unremitting demand that it would only attend bilateral talks with the United States. US credibility is at an all time low in Pyongyang. It will take a miracle of adroit American diplomacy at the meeting to reverse the DPRK becoming a declared nuclear power and to avoid being blamed for the failure of the talks.

What's more, it appears that the DPRK-an upstart state with an area less than one-third of California, a population of about twenty million shrinking daily from starvation and exodus, and a national economy the size of Alameda County in the San Francisco Bay Area-relishes the prospect of taking-on the United States, the world's only mega-power. As a pipsqueak power among five sumo wrestlers, the DPRK will bite them all on the ankle to get the show moving. Even before the meeting began, the DPRK nipped its erstwhile ally and likely host, China, by announcing its agreement to the American multilateral format via Moscow instead of Beijing.

If the six-way talks fail, then the confrontation over the DPRK's alleged nuclear weapons program may result in a Korean Krakatoa-a paroxysm of violence so great that it would be heard around the world, like the explosion of Krakatoa in 1883. Such a war could not only destroy the two capital cities of Korea, Pyongyang and Seoul, but would risk a calamitous war involving the great powers and the possible use of weapons of mass destruction. Such an event would exceed greatly the impact of the September 11 attacks on the United States and heighten global insecurity for years to come. Avoiding a Korean Krakatoa is not just of vital interest for all parties to the Korean conflict-it is of vital interest for all.

Given the gulf that divides the United States and the DPRK-not to mention the other regional powers-over the DPRK's nuclear program, it is worth asking how the United States declared policy of settling the matter peacefully might be achieved?

The Nautilus scenarios workshop, A Korean Krakatoa? Scenarios for the Peaceful Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis, asked: Given the pressures that could lead to armed conflict between the United States and the DPRK in the near future, in the context of domestic political concerns that lead-up to the next US presidential election, can one imagine plausible scenarios of a peaceful resolution to the crisis before November, 2004? What are the strategic elements of such scenarios? What are the pitfalls? If the conflict spins out of control, in what ways could one push towards a

peaceful outcome?

In conceiving such scenarios, it is critical to note that "peaceful" and "non-nuclear" are not simple, black-and-white words. Achieving a non-nuclear Korea via all means short of a full-scale war might be defined as peaceful by President Bush. And verifiable dismantlement of the DPRK's nuclear program can be achieved many ways and over different time frames. Although American negotiators have already announced that the DPRK won't get what it demands—a security pact with the United States—there are, in fact, many ways to meet the DPRK at least halfway.

The Scenarios for the Peaceful Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis workshop created four scenarios to explore how President Bush's de-nuclearizing the DPRK goal might be achieved. In the first, Green Flash, the DPRK has admitted and tested its nuclear weapons but a precarious peace prevails. In Boom Boom, the DPRK has gone nuclear but the situation is spiraling out of control towards war. In Eagle Stands Alone, the United States has confronted a DPRK that, for reasons of its own, has not gone nuclear. The United States has failed to force a regime change in Pyongyang and is preoccupied by security challenges outside of Korea. Finally, in Embrace Tiger, Retreat to Mountain, the United States has engaged the DPRK as part of a broad coalition of states willing to facilitate its economic recovery and transition while the DPRK is moving incrementally back to non-nuclear status. In all four scenarios, the DMZ remains tense.

Today, the United States faces an immediate future that will contain elements from all four scenarios. How the future evolves depends critically on pro-active moves by the United States. What do the scenarios suggest American negotiators should be prepared to say to the North Koreans in the "bilateral moments" that both sides have presaged will occur in the six-power talks?

As they enter the wrestling ring with the DPRK, American negotiators should contemplate seven strategies developed at the workshop in response to these four scenarios. These strategies aimed to shift the more violent and more nuclear scenarios—Eagle Stands Alone, Boom Boom, and Green Flash—towards a relatively peaceful scenario like Embrace Tiger, Retreat to Mountain. Several of the strategies could work well together and the first one—"Ice Breaker"—could easily act as the entry point for nearly any of the other approaches.

At this early stage, symbols are of critical importance. It is essential that the American team lead with an Ice Breaker. Designed to 'get the ball rolling,' Ice Breaker proposes a series of small but important steps forward, mutually-reinforcing efforts to make further negotiation possible. Two ice-breakers can be envisaged.

The first builds on the past Missing-in-Action US-DPRK Joint Recovery Operations. It would lead to an unofficial high-level military meeting between retired American officers and their DPRK counterparts. Retired Marine General General Jack Davis is an ideal candidate for an "unofficial" emissary to the DPRK. He wants the DPRK to continue the JRO work, and is well-respected by both the US and DPRK military. Former head of the Joint Chiefs General Shalikashvili would be an appropriate partner with General Davis.

The second follows the recent US congressional delegation to the DPRK. The US delegation could propose that a second congressional mission go to Pyongyang to hold discussions with the DPRK's political leadership on possible American economic support should the DPRK dismantle its nuclear weapons program. The delegation could visit the US-DPRK Village Windpower project site as symbolic of US commitment to people-centered development of the DPRK's economy.

It is known that the DPRK may be willing to return the USS Pueblo to American hands if relations improve. Although of little physical value, the return of the Pueblo would be enormously significant

symbolically as a reciprocal gesture of goodwill.

The other six strategies-finding ways for everyone to save face, convening a coalition of the willing-to-engage, putting the plutonium horse before the uranium cart, using precision-guided markets to support economic transition in the DPRK, avoiding global overreach by the United States in Korea at a time of enormous commitments in other regions, and, above all, acting now to avoid any prospect of DPRK direct or indirect nuclear attacks on the United States and its allies in the form of plutonium pineapples exported from the Korean Peninsula-are all essential. But none will work unless an icebreaker is found and used to effect in Washington and Pyongyang.

The Administration's constructivist approach to North Korea-the slow creation of a regional architecture to impose global principles on this intransigent midget state with nuclear aspirations-will face its key test at the six-way talks. Failure does not automatically mean war-but it does mean drift and disbelief that the United States has a policy toward North Korea's nuclear threat that will lead to verifiable dismantlement.

If the DPRK walks free, the rest of the world will draw its own conclusion as to the credibility of American leadership and will make their own deals to protect themselves from the DPRK and each other.

Note: The full report, A Korean Krakatoa? Scenarios for the Peaceful Resolution of the North Korean Nuclear Crisis is on-line at:

<https://nautilus.org/DPRKBriefingBook/scenarios/DPRKscenarios2003.pdf>

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
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