Policy Forum 02-10A: North Korea as the Ninth Nuclear Power?

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by Victor Gilinsky

CONTENTS

I. Introduction

II. Essay by Victor Gilinsky

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

I. Introduction

The essay below is by Victor Gilinsky, an energy consultant who has written on US-DPRK nuclear relations since 1993 and former commissioner of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission. Gilinsky argues that The North made its admission about a uranium enrichment program to serve its security interests and create more opportunity for economic blackmail while, in their view, risking little. It reflects a DPRK assessment of Western, Japanese, and South Korean weakness. They very likely have one or more plutonium-based nuclear weapons, and apparently have the prospect of many more and think they can get the world to accept that. We have to prove them wrong. This puts us in a tough spot in Korea and more generally in enforcing the Nonproliferation Treaty, whose future is in the balance. As an immediate first step, the US should close out the KEDO LWR project.

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II. Essay by Victor Gilinsky

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It would help if we knew a bit more. As Congressman Markey observed, we are entitled to know at least what our government told the North Koreans. What does our government think the DPRK has, or will have, in the way of enrichment capacity? What exactly did the North say in response? In the absence of more information the following is a kind of horseback reaction to the sketchy and sometimes inconsistent newspaper accounts.

Why did the North admit having a secret enrichment program? I think there is a clue in our confused and weak reaction. Our national security establishment is occupied with a possible war against Iraq and has shown a marked inability to multitask. This was a good time to slip us the news softly, to let us know that we are dealing with a nuclear weapons country, and to do so without risking a violent US reaction. It served the North's security interests, provided opportunities for further blackmail (for slowing down or freezing some part of the program). And it must have appeared not to risk too much. The DPRK must have given up expecting to get the LWRs that KEDO is building. The Bush administration's seriousness about inspection made it difficult any longer to expect that the inspection provision of the Agreed Framework would be finessed. Or to expect that the United States would export the necessary US-manufactured reactor parts to the DPRK.

Beyond that, the Japanese Prime Minster visited the DPRK in September, after learning from the United States about the North's nuclear weapons activities, and he still talked to them about providing large amounts of Japanese assistance. That must have left an impression in the DPRK of Western and Japanese weakness on the nuclear weapons issue. The latest (October 22) KCNA release reflects a view that the international tide has turned against the United States in its efforts to force nuclear disarmament on Iraq and North Korea. The DPRK sends out multiple messages to its audiences-threats to instill fear that the North may lash out, and softer messages to suggest they will be reasonable if we just give them some respect. You have to give the North high marks for playing a weak hand expertly (as they did in 1994).

We have to assume the DPRK has at least one or two bombs. This has been implicit since the early

1990s in the conclusion that they had illicitly separated enough plutonium for such weapons. That after all was the reason for postponing the IAEA inspections required for joining the NPT. Can anyone believe that they would not let their weapons scientists turn the stuff to bomb use? Or that they would then disarm themselves before the IAEA inspectors arrived? (Or even reveal that they had perpetrated a gigantic hoax, in the unlikely case that was true?) And yet we collectively suspended our critical faculties and pretended that we had a process that was going to resolve all this by providing them with, of all things, nuclear power reactors. (The provision of these was predicated on getting around US nonproliferation law-a circumstance not calculated to increase respect for the law, or the NPT, or DPRK respect for the United States.) One lesson is that we have to stop basing policy on wishful thinking.

We cannot assume that they might just have "primitive" bombs as reported in the press. This is not 1945. Lots of technology that had to be invented in Los Alamos is now easily available. A Pakistani scientist told me that getting their enrichment plants working was difficult but making bombs was relatively easy-he said he hoped countries wouldn't find out just how easy. We should assume the DPRK bombs are effective and powerful. It would also not be surprising if the Pakistanis helped them over the difficulties in enrichment in exchange for help on missiles. A. Q. Khan, who ran the Pakistani enrichment enterprise and one of the Pakistani missile programs, appears to have been actively involved with the North Koreans.

This much is clear. We are at a critical point in dealing with North Korean nuclear weapons. This puts us at a critical point in enforcing the NPT, something we have never done before. One might say, we are at a grim point. Unfortunately, these issues have not had the focus in the government than they deserve. They have been pushed aside by the single-minded focus on Iraq. The North Koreans have done what we accuse Iraq of aiming to do. The North also poses a much more tougher and complex problem. Are we going to attempt to enforce the Treaty as best we can? If not, it will become a nullity? In which case, what does this say about all the US government activities devoted to, or justified by, nonproliferation? A Secretary of Defense of years past said he could replace all the nonproliferation analysts and policymakers in and out of government (whom he didn't regard as serious people) with just two staffers-one to count the new nuclear countries and the other to wring his hands. Is that where we are headed?

Which is not to say it is clear what to do. But to start, the administration should stop treating the North Korean issue as an annoyance on the way to war with Iraq, and should stop downplaying its importance in public. The issue needs serious, competent top level attention, which it hasn't always gotten-one of the problems is that the political people have not always understood the technical facts. We can't do it alone-we have to continue working with our South Korean and Japanese allies, and with China. Bringing them around is not an easy matter because South Korea and Japan are prone to hope for the best. And US clumsiness has made them uncomfortable.

There are some positions we should take immediately. As of yesterday the newspaper reported that no one had told KEDO that the new situation affects the LWR project. Someone should tell them that as far as the United States is concerned the game is over. We will no longer support any transfer of nuclear technology to North Korea. Beyond that, the "maximum international pressure" Secretary Kelley speaks is essential. I wouldn't expect that it will have much of an impact on the DPRK in the short term, but it will have a useful educational effect around the world and will announce our seriousness.

And we will have to talk to the North. It is going to be tough. This time we can't just kick the can down the road by rewarding repeat violation of the NPT and out agreement. It is difficult at this stage to see the outline of something that will work. The kind of nuclear disarmament and permanent intrusive inspection arrangement that would satisfy us is one that would be seen in the

North as regime threatening. We may have to wait them out. And, depending on how they proceed, we may have to go beyond that. North Korea

Looking way down the road, if Korea unifies, does it inherit North Korean nuclear weapons? And what will be the effect on Japan? Will there be a belt of nuclear state right across Asia? The combination of sovereign nation states and nuclear weapons spells disaster in the long term. The NPT was an attempt to avoid that eventuality. It is flawed but necessary. We have to find a way to make it work. That means enforcing it.

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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Return to top
back to top

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