

Policy Forum 02-23A: North Korea Goes Nuclear, Washington Readies for War, South Korea Holds Key



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by Alexandre Mansourov

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I. Introduction

Dr. Mansourov argues that North Korea is going nuclear, while the United States seriously considers using force to disarm and even dismantle the North Korean regime. Pyongyang and Washington are dead set on a head-on collision course. Whether war will erupt on the Korean peninsula or not will ultimately depend on the choice of the South Korean people. The December 19, 2002, presidential elections will indeed be a watershed event, which may decide whether there will be war or peace on the Korean peninsula after the conclusion of the Iraqi operation next year.

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II. Essay by Alexandre Mansourov

"North Korea Goes Nuclear, Washington Readies for War, South Korea Holds Key"

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The Korean peninsula lived in the nuclear shadow for decades. All North Korean neighbors in Northeast Asia possess nuclear power: Russia, China, and the United States are long-time members of the nuclear club, whereas Japan and the ROK are the so-called "para-nuclear states" with robust nuclear energy programs and a near-term nuclear option in terms of their ability to manufacture and deploy nuclear weapons on a relatively short notice. Korean leaders in the North and the South harbored nuclear ambitions and kept their nuclear option open for several decades. Great powers extended their nuclear umbrellas to both Korean states during the Cold War. Since the end of the Cold War, the ROK continued to rely on the U.S. nuclear deterrence, whereas the DPRK has been facing an implicit U.S. nuclear threat mostly on its own. Thus, any hope of removing the Korean peninsula from under the nuclear shadow is simply wishful thinking.

What is Pyongyang's long-term nuclear rationale? North Korean nuclear ambitions are clearly driven by the demands of national security and economic development, as well as considerations of international status and national pride. On the one hand, the nuclear program is perceived as the best strategic deterrent amidst North Korea's rapidly deteriorating military predicament and the ultimate solution to its permanent energy crisis. On the other hand, nuclear power was always seen as a "magic ticket" to the world's most exclusive club and as a homegrown ginseng-like tonic for the diminishing potency of the fatigued North Korean people.

Kim Il Sung invested tremendous national resources to make the nuclear option available and effective for both national security purposes and economic development needs. In the process, he alleviated national fears and pampered national ego. In contrast, Kim Jong Il dared to bargain away the nuclear option, thereby, possibly, circumventing his father's will and undermining the Great

Leader's legacy. In the process, he put in jeopardy the Sun nation's very right to self-defense and handicapped national economic development by gambling on the KEDO's scheme. Kim Jong Il's domestic political standing cannot but suffer from such a grand miscalculation.

The international community taught Pyongyang a harsh lesson that nuclear power was easy to promise but hard to share. In 1985, the Soviet Union promised to give North Korea nuclear power for peaceful use, by constructing three 635 MWe LWRs in exchange for the DPRK's accession to the non-proliferation treaty and ratification of the IAEA safeguards regime. Pyongyang bought into this promise and joined the nuclear non-proliferation regime in the late 1980s-early 1990s. But the collapse of the USSR left the North without much promised and long expected nuclear power industry and straddled it with the newly acquired nuclear non-proliferation obligations.

In 1994, the United States promised to build two 1,000 MWe LWRs in the North in exchange for the latter's commitment to freeze its nuclear development program. Eight years later, Washington decided to walk away from the agreed framework and leave Pyongyang with rusting decrepit nuclear facilities in Yongbyon and a concrete shell in Kumpo, as well as a whole new layer of nuclear non-proliferation obligations stemming from the DPRK's commitments under the Geneva accords and various preceding and ensuing inter-Korean declarations.

From Pyongyang's perspective, two great powers and two grand promises rendered the same pathetic result in two decades - two spectacular betrayals. The DPRK leaders over the lifetime of one generation found themselves deceived and trapped by the international community twice. Under the prodding from the great powers concerned, they made a commitment to the NPT in 1985 and reiterated it again in 1994, and, hence, moved to forego a nuclear option. But, they were screwed and got almost nothing in return, specifically, no promised nuclear power reactors. In the meantime, they lost a nuclear security guarantee from the now defunct Soviet Union and became exposed to what they perceive as a threat of pre-emptive nuclear strike from the United States. No wonder the DPRK's leaders have no trust in the nuclear commitments made by their surrounding great powers and are obsessed with indigenous efforts to acquire nuclear power of their own.

Given such a history of long-lasting, albeit occasionally suppressed, nuclear ambitions and lingering perceptions of unwarranted nuclear betrayals and cheating, it would be foolish to expect the current regime in Pyongyang to seriously consider halting its long march to the nuclear powerdom. The KEDO debacle not only foreclosed the relatively easy way for the North to acquire nuclear power, but it also destroyed the nascent domestic constituency for nuclear restraint and non-proliferation in the North. The truth difficult to swallow is that North Korea IS going nuclear, whether the rest of the world likes it or not. This author expects Pyongyang to shift into high gear its efforts to upgrade and expand rapidly its existing nuclear research and development projects and facilities, including their weaponization aspect, in the immediate future.

In the meantime, Washington seems to be bent on leaving no options to Pyongyang with its increasingly hard-line stance on the nuclear disarmament issue. Once the late Soviet leader Khrushchev described the American approach to arms control negotiations with the Soviet Union as "What is mine is mine, what is yours is negotiable!" Kim Jong Il appears to have learnt that although this characterization may have been valid under President Clinton, the current administration's approach to Pyongyang seems to be "What is mine is mine, but what is yours is also mine; so give it up and shut up!" Regardless of whether or not this is a morally right lesson to teach, it is only prudent to assume that as long as Kim Jong Il stays in power, he is extremely unlikely to submit to the U.S. pressure and disarm unilaterally to Washington's liking.

Arguably, the nuclear option may no longer be negotiable for Pyongyang. Hence, one has to conclude that the DPRK's proclaimed interest in the continuation of nuclear freeze at Yongbyon and

seeming willingness "to satisfy the U.S. security concerns" through dialogue on a reciprocal basis, which were quite genuine last October, are progressively losing their practical meaning and can be more credibly interpreted as examples of either bureaucratic inertia or propaganda ploys.

Where does it leave Washington? The immediate roadmap laid out by the Bush administration clearly leads towards confrontation. The Kelly process is about unilateral disarmament or multilateral compulsion of North Korea. On November 15, 2002, the U.S.-led KEDO decided to halt the delivery of heavy fuel oil to the DPRK, effectively suspending one of the key components of the agreed framework. In response, the DPRK rejected KEDO's request to send inspectors to monitor the distribution of the November HFO shipment. On November 29, the IAEA upped the ante by adopting a strongly-worded resolution denouncing the DPRK's nuclear ambitions and setting the deadline for compliance with its safeguards regime on March 2003 with concomitant threat to send the matter to the UN Security Council for enforcement. The next day, the DPRK Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun angrily replied that the North Korean nuclear issue was none of the IAEA's business and could be resolved only in direct talks between Pyongyang and Washington.

On December 11, 2002, the KEDO executive Board is likely to suspend the implementation of two KEDO-DPRK protocols (on training and transportation), which will practically halt the KEDO-sponsored exchanges between the DPRK's nuclear authorities and the international community. One can expect that by next March the KEDO Board will have suspended, step-by-step, the rest of seven protocols and other contracts and agreements and will have withdrawn most of its personnel from its Kumpo site. In response, the DPRK government may start putting pressure on the existing IAEA inspections at the Yongbyon nuclear complex by denying the IAEA inspectors on the ground access to films and cameras, or by blocking them from changing the films and reloading the cameras, and, eventually, by asking them to leave the country altogether.

By next May, the UN Security Council may find itself considering a U.S.-sponsored resolution aimed at forcing the DPRK to come into full compliance with the IAEA safeguards requirements or else. In response, if events continue to spiral out of control, Pyongyang may decide to remove some or all 8,000 spent fuel rods from their storage ponds for processing to top the ante, which may become a casus belli for the Bush administration espousing a doctrine of preemption, especially regarding "rogue states armed with weapons of mass destruction."

Let's fast forward to May 2003. The choice for the United States will be similar to the dilemma it faced in 1994 - a preemptive military strike (preferably multilateral, but unilateral if necessary) or nuclear freeze talks backed by regional allies (Japan and ROK) and partners (Russia and China). This time around, in the post-September 11 environment of global fight against terror and terror-sponsoring rogue states and the "axis of evil," will the United States prevail in persuading its reluctant allies and partners in the utility of denying North Korea nuclear power and a nuclear deterrent even by military force, or, if it fails, will it choose to go it alone in disregard of the will and national interests of its key allies and partners in the region? Or, alternatively, will it succumb to their appeasement-oriented pressures, back down, and return to the negotiation table again?

The world went through these motions before. Now the question is why Washington seems to be interested in reinventing the wheel? Because this time, it is not the wheel, they say: it is something else. What is this "magic broom" that forces the hard-line hand in the White House chamber of secrets and restores the credibility of the threat and/or use of force? Is it a different calculus of costs and benefits of military confrontation with North Korea today, as compared to the 1994 assessments?

Obviously, North Korea is much weaker economically and militarily and less stable politically today than it was in 1994, whereas the U.S.-ROK alliance is so much stronger. Hence, the USFK may

expect to establish "full situational dominance" on the Korean battlefield from the D-day until the prompt end of hostilities in allied victory. Quick and cheap victories in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and soon, possibly, Iraq may definitely boost the confidence and air of superiority and invincibility in the minds of political-military leadership in Washington. With the assumption that the revolution in military affairs can minimize the humongous casualties and damages expected from the most-feared KPA's 15,000-tube artillery barrage on the outskirts of Seoul and North Korean special operations in the opening minutes of the war, one can plausibly hope to bring down the self-pumped tough-nut North Koreans, especially since cunning Serbs, ferocious Talibs, and deeply entrenched Iraqi National Guards could be easily beaten, despite all dire predictions otherwise.

Besides, back in 1993-1994, North Korea was still widely perceived as a freshly minted member of the United Nations and close ally of China and Russia, which restrained the U.S. freedom of action, especially in the UN Security Council. In contrast, in 2002, North Korea is branded as part of the "axis of evil" to be demolished, is designated as a rogue state sponsoring global terror and proliferating weapons of mass destruction, which must be stopped at any and all costs, and is increasingly isolated even from its former benefactors, who joined without hesitation the U.S.-led global anti-terrorist coalition these days.

There is hardly anyone in the world, who will dare to stand up to George W. Bush and his campaign aimed at securing America and its allies from global terror and "rogue states in possession of weapons of mass destruction" and at bringing down a brutal and nasty dictatorship torturing its own people and, thereby, tearing down the Korean Wall, the last vestige of Cold War in Asia. If Washington decides to convince the world in its total commitment to nuclear disarmament and regime change in North Korea, like it did in the case of Iraq, neither Moscow nor Beijing are likely to stick their necks out to challenge its credibility.

If the United States decides to pull the plug on Kim Jong Il's regime, the Dear Leader can hardly count on Moscow's all-out support, despite burgeoning renaissance in the Russian-DPRK relations. For Russia grudgingly acquiesced to the three Baltic states' admission to NATO and unprecedented U.S. military presence in Central Asia, the areas formerly under Soviet sovereign control. If Moscow yielded gradually to Washington in its so-called "near abroad," namely, a buffer zone vital to its national security, as well as on the ABM treaty (the so-called "lynchpin of strategic stability"), what is the evidence that Mr. Putin will draw a red line in the Far East and will try to block a more aggressive U.S. policy toward North Korea? There is none.

As for China, there is growing uncertainty whether Beijing will come to diplomatic and military assistance to Pyongyang in the event of crisis, too, which plays into the U.S. hands. In 1994, the PRC had little trade and investment with the ROK, whereas in 2002, the ROK became China's third largest trading partner, with bilateral trade rising to almost 35 billion U.S. dollars and the ROK investments in China topping ten billion U.S. dollars. Compare these numbers with less than 500 million U.S. dollars in trade and negligible investments between the PRC and DPRK as of the end of 2002, and you will see where Chinese capital sees its future. Moreover, China's arrest of Mr. Yang Bin, an official governor-designate of a newly established Sinuiju Special Administrative Region and a close friend of Kim Jong Il, strongly suggests that Beijing will not shy away from resolutely defending its own national interests in the northern part of the Korean peninsula, even if they come in clash with those of the ruling elite in Pyongyang. In strategic terms, China does not want to see a nuclearized Korean peninsula or Japan, the view repeatedly stressed by all Chinese leaders, including in their summit talks with President Bush.

In the final analysis, if the United States and ROK properly address China's national interests in the Korean peninsula and gently massage Chinese sensibilities, especially on the issue of the U.S. military presence in the South, there is some room for a plausible calculation that the fourth

generation of Chinese leaders (with no blood ties or ideological bonds to their North Korean neighbors) may well decide to give up on propping up the antiquated and unpredictable North Korean regime, whose existence only increases political, financial, economic, and military liabilities for Beijing, whose geopolitical value as a strategic buffer zone continues to decline in the age of the revolution in military affairs, and whose WMD proliferation activities constitute a growing menace to the entire region. It is interesting to note that Richard Haas, Director of the U.S. State Department Policy Planning Staff, clearly bets that China can be persuaded to work with the United States "to end the North Korean threat" and will eventually acquiesce to the U.S. action vis-à-vis the DPRK. [1](#)

With Russia and China on the sidelines, neither supporting nor actively resisting the U.S. efforts, the U.S.-led campaign to mount maximum international pressure on the DPRK, including immediate suspension of the U.S.-DPRK and Japan-DPRK normalization talks, possible freeze on inter-Korean exchanges, gradual termination of humanitarian assistance, possible economic blockade, initiation of the world-wide propaganda campaign to denounce the DPRK's human rights record, as well as interdiction of the DPRK's alleged arms supplies on high seas, is likely to further weaken, delegitimize, ostracize, and corner the North Korean regime. Clearly, Washington expects that the current government in Pyongyang will not be able to withstand mounting international pressure and is likely to crack and give up for nothing.

The big unknown is the position of the future ROK government, which can throw a monkey's wrench into the above calculus favoring the use of force to compel Pyongyang to disarm. Clearly, Washington bets on the GNP and its presidential front-runner, Mr. Lee Hui-chang's victory ("a sure thing" just a few weeks ago), which should theoretically bring Seoul more in line with the current U.S. hard-line policy towards Pyongyang and further strengthen the U.S.-ROK military security alliance. Mr. Lee Hui-chang's victory will put in place the final piece of the puzzle, namely, the ROK's firm support for the U.S.-led "strangulation coalition," and may open the door for a military option aimed at nuclear disarmament and regime change in North Korea.

The problem is that the MDP and its underdog presidential candidate, Mr. Roh Moo-hyun, may well come back and stage a spectacular upset (which this author expects), riding on the rising wave of anti-American sentiments sweeping the ROK in the wake of two acquittals of two U.S. servicemen for accidental murder of two Korean 13-year old girls last summer. If Mr. Roh, who is known for his lack of deference towards Washington, wins the presidency on December 19, then the Bush administration will have a very hard time in persuading the ROK government to join it in its all-out campaign to isolate and compel the DPRK to disarm and change. The Roh Moo-hyun government is sure not only to continue the Kim Dae-joon's sunshine policy of brisk and comprehensive engagement with the North, but is likely to come to save Kim Jong Il's regime from the threat of the U.S. military action by frustrating the Kelly process and blocking any use of force at the final hour. The South's continuous benign engagement with the North under the Roh's administration may well foreclose the military option for the United States, possibly undermine the credibility of the U.S.-ROK military alliance in general, and leave Washington with no choice but to go back to the negotiation table with Pyongyang.

To sum up, I believe that North Korea is going nuclear, while the United States seriously considers using force to disarm and even dismantle the North Korean regime. Pyongyang and Washington are dead set on a head-on collision course. Whether war will erupt on the Korean peninsula or not will ultimately depend on the choice of the South Korean people. The December 19, 2002, presidential elections will indeed be a watershed event, which may decide whether there will be war or peace on the Korean peninsula after the conclusion of the Iraqi operation next year.

[1] See Richard Haas, "China and the Future of U.S.-China Relations," Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York, December 5, 2002.

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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