

Policy Forum 03-30A: North Korea Is Poised To Cross The Nuclear Rubicon: Will The Canary Die In The Mine?

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By Alexandre Y. Mansourov

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I. Introduction

Alexandre Y. Mansourov argues Kim Jong Il's game plan in Beijing includes a) treating the Chinese intermediaries as a pro-American party at the talks, which are best approached as a two against one boxing match; b) giving both, the PRC and the United States, an advance notice about pending initiation of reprocessing operations; c) tying down Washington at the negotiation table and buying time for military build-up at home; d) watching for the "canary in the mine" to die as an early warning signal about possible American attack; and e) framing the United States up in a way delegitimizing any U.S. unilateral military action against the North in the eyes of the international community. He further argues that the trilateral talks offer the United States a venue to present a real ultimatum to North Korea in the presence of Chinese witnesses - disarm and open up or else, with China's tacit support behind the scenes for further enforcement action in case of the North Korean non-compliance. Dr. Mansourov concludes that the Beijing trilateral talks are likely to end up with a spectacular diplomatic disaster and may lead to further escalation of nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula.

The views expressed in this article are personal opinions of the author and do not reflect the official positions of the APCSS or the U.S. government. Nor do they necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute.

II. Essay by Alexandre Y. Mansourov

"North Korea Is Poised To Cross The Nuclear Rubicon: Will The Canary Die In The Mine?"

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A lesson of history

Lee Hong Zhang, Vice-Roy of Imperial China, once summarized traditional Korean-Chinese relations as follows:

"With scarcely a tribute that was worth while in all these hundreds of years, Corea has ever been independent and even resentful of our influence or interests; but just as soon as trouble looms up on the horizon, from causes having their source either within or without the kingdom, she comes begging for help. And help has never been denied, for the people of the country are our people, and they share with us the ever-lasting dislike for the pigmy Nipponese, with their strutting ways and ignorant presumptions" ("Memoirs," March 17, 1882).

This statement underscores a profound invisible bond in Korean-Chinese relations that are full of symbols, procedures, tedious routine, and boring overall, but very important for Korea. The relationship of various Korean states with China has been pivotal throughout the entire Korean history. Korean leaders are fully aware that China can make or break any Korean state. China always served as a source of domestic and international legitimacy, military protection, and developmental model for Korea.

In this respect, it is interesting to recall that Korea relied on Chinese guidance and assistance in overcoming its centuries-old self-imposed international isolation in the last quarter of the 19th century. Thus, when the Shufeldt mission dispatched to Korea in 1880-1882 failed to achieve its primary objective of opening up the "hermit kingdom," relying mainly on Japanese advice and diplomatic assistance, Chinese intermediation proved to be indispensable in bringing the Korean court to the negotiation table in Beijing. It was China's Vice-Roy Lee Hung Zhang who prepared four drafts of the first historical Korean-American treaty, negotiated it with Admiral Shufeldt, and, then, prodded recalcitrant Koreans to accept it. That is how the Shufeldt Treaty of Peace, Amity, and Navigation between the United States and Kingdom of Chosun was born in 1883. It is amazing that although Korean interests were most at stake, Korean king was hardly a player (the United States and China) in the treaty-making process, because of Korea's status as China's dependency. The Shufeldt treaty, the first modern treaty concluded between Korea and a Western country, opened Korea to the Western world, albeit not on equal terms, and became a model for subsequent treaties with other Western powers under the auspices of international law beyond the bounds of China's imperial protection.

Should we expect a similar historical breakthrough in the upcoming trilateral talks in Beijing between the United States, North Korea, and China? Will China be instrumental in facilitating the North Korean breakout of the U.S.-sponsored growing international isolation in the wake of the collapse of the agreed framework and unfolding second nuclear crisis?

Bleeding Lips and Broken Teeth

One of the "Baghdad surprises" is that at long last Pyongyang seems to have answered the call and come to the negotiation table with Washington. On the heels of the overwhelming U.S. military victory in Iraq, conservative analysts rushed to interpret the North Korean decision to take part in the trilateral talks involving the United States, DPRK, and PRC in Beijing as a sign of Pyongyang's yielding to Washington in the six-month old nuclear standoff under the mounting pressure of growing international isolation and ostracism. The harder the pressure the more and better results in dealings with the communist North, they conclude. There is nothing further from the truth.

In my opinion, Pyongyang's consent to come to Beijing for trilateral talks with Washington seems to be the product of some intricate secret North Korean-Chinese negotiations aimed at redefining the nature of the North Korean-Chinese alliance and restructuring the entire bilateral relationship along more independent and distant lines.

On the one hand, North Koreans arrived in Beijing with hurt feelings and considerable pent-up resentment toward their Chinese benefactors. Over the past decade, China, which arguably possesses the second largest economy in the world, consistently refused to provide its North Korean ally with more than subsistence level aid designed primarily to keep Kim Jong Il's regime alive but on a very tight leash. Despite Pyongyang's concerns, the PRC government, conscious of its international image, demonstrated startling reluctance to really crack down à la Tiananmen on the North Korean refugees periodically assaulting foreign diplomatic compounds in Beijing. Beijing disapproved of Kim Jong Il's economic restructuring blueprint for the special administrative region in Sinuiju and arrested Mr. Yang Bin, Kim's personal choice for SAR governor in September 2002. Last but not least, Beijing gradually shut down fourteen out of fifteen pipelines transporting heavy fuel oil from China to North Korea in the course of the past year, with even the last operational pipeline having reportedly been taken out of service for technical maintenance for three days last February. This is heavy pressure. No wonder that the official North Korean propaganda began to assert in late March 2003 that "some dishonest forces of the international community (read China - AM) are joining the U.S. in its moves to increase its pressure upon the DPRK over its nuclear issue and they are little short of giving a shot in the arm of the United States keen to unleash a nuclear

war on the Korean Peninsula," (i).

On the other hand, it all boils down to the North Korean decision to become a nuclear power in order to safeguard its sovereignty and independence against perceived U.S. nuclear threat and China's adamant insistence on the non-nuclearization of the Korean peninsula. The time has come for Pyongyang to find out whether or not Beijing can be counted on as a military ally in the looming confrontation against the United States, despite China's political refusal to underwrite Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions.

When the United States launched its military campaign against Iraq, there were persistent rumors in Seoul that Kim Jong Il might have made a clandestine visit to the PRC in order to solicit a Chinese commitment to the defense of North Korea in the event of a U.S. preemptive strike against Yongbyun nuclear facilities. These rumors proved to be groundless. No bird in the sky saw Kim's armored train crossing the only railroad bridge over the Yalu River near Dandong (of course, he could have crawled under the bridge like a traditional Korean turtle, but I do not think that he is that desperate yet). No one saw his train arriving and being parked on Beijing Central Station or any other way stations in Beijing's vicinity. There were no reports indicating that his car convoy was seen anywhere in Beijing or any senior Chinese leaders visiting any well-known and not so well-known guest houses where Kim Jong Il and his entourage had previously stayed. In other words, no external surveillance detected any physical signs of Kim's visit to Beijing.

But what is obvious is that right after the United States began to drop bombs on the Iraqi leadership targets, Kim Jong Il and his top generals went into hiding for a few weeks, probably, in the Samjiyon area in the vicinity of Mount Paektu on the DPRK-PRC border. (In general, I would expect to see less and less of Kim Jong Il in public and his "on-the-spot" guidance signs in the future because he is certain to try to evade the U.S. surveillance and complicate the U.S. efforts at plotting geographical patterns of his movements.) What is interesting is that several flights of heavy cargo planes from Beijing to Pyongyang to Samjiyon were observed during that time period. It is possible that Kim Jong Il may have met some senior Chinese PLA and CCP CC officials while in hiding in Samjiyon. The Samjiyon area is famous for being the cradle of the North Korean revolution during the anti-Japanese guerrilla struggle. It is also a well-known traditional escape area for the North Korean leaders in times of hostilities (for instance, during the Korean War). (Bearing this history in mind, will Samjiyon become the future grave of the North Korean revolution?) But, most importantly, the Mount Paektu border area is very convenient for escalating the war in the event of the U.S. missile misfiring and violating the nearby Chinese airspace. One may wonder whether Kim Jong Il's bunker is actually located on the North Korean or Chinese side of the border, given the notorious tunnel-digging skills of the North Korean army.

Anyway, it appears likely that Kim Jong Il and his aides held some long and tough consultations with some senior Chinese military and party officials in Samjiyon. The North Koreans are alleged to have requested that the PLA provide them with solid rocket fuel, some missile spare parts, and gun powder (!). In return, they indicated their willingness to be more flexible in their negotiating approach towards the United States. In general, the North Koreans appeared to try to play off the pro-North leaning PLA top brass and old conservative CCP CC establishment against the more internationally-oriented Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which revealed its anti-North Korean bias during the recent visits to Beijing by the DPRK Foreign Minister Paek Nam-sun and SPA Chairman Kim Yong-nam.

Thus, right after Washington all but declared military victory in Baghdad on April 9, the Dear Leader came out of his mountainous hideout to celebrate the Sun Day on April 15, and Pyongyang surprised the world by declaring its readiness to take part in hastily arranged trilateral talks with the United States under Chinese patronage in Beijing. What is the story behind the story here?

Tactically, by agreeing to come to the SARS-infected Beijing, North Koreans returned a big favor to the Chinese: the SARS scare damaged China's international prestige and undermined the international credibility of its government, whereas the news about trilateral talks went a long way in improving Beijing's international image with positive publicity. In one brilliant stroke, Pyongyang paid back to Beijing in full for the latter's opposition to the U.N.S.C.'s consideration of anti-NK sanctions on April 9-10, 2003. In the process, the North Korean diplomats were delighted to see their arch-nemesis, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly, spend a few days in the SARS-infected Beijing in violation of the State Department's own travel ban to China.

From an operational point of view, it is extremely important that less than forty-eight hours before the middle-level North Korean-American negotiations were supposed to begin in the Chinese capital, Vice-Marshal Cho Myong-rok, the number two man in Pyongyang's power hierarchy, who had met with President Clinton in October 2000 to ascertain the absence of hostile intent towards the DPRK on the part of the United States, undertook a surprise visit to Beijing and met with Mr. Hu Jintao and senior Chinese military officials. Cho's surprising visit must have been one of the outgrowths of the earlier Samjiyon consultations. It was perhaps designed to deliver Kim Jong-Il's personal requests about military aid and diplomatic assistance directly to the new generation Chinese leaders, including Mr. Hu Jintao, who had met Kim Jong Il twice before the 2000 inter-Korean summit but had no personal feelings and attachment to the North Korean comrades and their cause, unlike the older generation leaders like Jiang Jemin who felt a certain degree of guilt for abandoning the PRC's North Korean ally in favor of the South in the early 1990s.

But judging by the fact that Mr. Hu Jintao firmly reiterated China's position on "non-nuclearization of the Korean Peninsula" and stated Chinese willingness to further only "good-neighborly and friendly cooperative relations" with the Korean comrades without any explicit commitment to mutual assistance, let alone mutual defense, whereas Vice-Marshal Cho stated his views on the international issues and the Korean peninsula and chose to stress only North Korea's determination "to enhance the friendly bilateral relations," the talks apparently failed to meet bilateral expectations, produced little good news for Pyongyang, and resulted in mutual disappointment and more profound policy disagreements than before. Thus, Kim Jong Il's personal envoy had to return home empty-handed from Beijing.

In reality, Cho Myong-rok's mission may well have been to probe Chinese intentions at the highest level - "will you be with us or against us when the chips are down?" Once the Chinese revealed their reluctance to extend their strategic nuclear umbrella to the North, despite their 1961 mutual defense treaty obligations, Vice-Marshal Cho may well have been authorized to give the Chinese an advance notice that the DPRK was about to cross the nuclear Rubicon and start reprocessing spent fuel rods if the Beijing talks prove to be a failure. In turn, the Chinese may have tried to impress their North Korean counterparts with the gravity of their predicament, by hinting that Beijing may choose to stay on the sidelines in the event of a limited U.S. surgical strike against Yongbyun nuclear facilities. It goes without saying that such a proposition must have incensed the North Korean envoy who rushed back to Pyongyang with a reinforced sense of international isolation and renewed determination to have his country hunker down in anticipation of the U.S. military attack. That extraordinary development may well signal the beginning of the end of the Chinese-North Korean military alliance.

It is noteworthy that the negative reaction from Pyongyang did not take long to follow. As soon as the failure of Cho's mission in Beijing became apparent, the DPRK government announced tighter measures to control SARS. On Tuesday, April 22, the DPRK MOFA sent out a circular diplomatic note to all foreign embassies and missions in Pyongyang informing them that all visitors to the DPRK, either over land, through sea ports or by flights, must receive medical examinations at

customs; that foreigners who have abnormal symptoms will be repatriated or sent to isolation wards in Pyongyang and Sinuiju; that all visitors without symptoms will be sent to designated hotels for a 10-day quarantine; that travel to countries and regions where SARS has occurred are temporarily restricted; and that contacts with visitors who come from SARS-affected countries and regions should be avoided. Since practically all the international traffic by sea, land, rail, and air (including most of international trade, tourism, cultural exchanges, and government contacts) comes to the North from and via China, the SARS ban means a total shutdown of the North Korean-Chinese border and temporary restrictions on all official contacts with China. Obviously, this measure, whether it is driven by genuine self-protective sanitary concerns or dictated by the politics of petty revenge cannot help but provoke a negative response from the Chinese government, which is fighting hard the SARS-generated worldwide negative publicity and does not need a stab in the back from its supposed North Korean "ally." Hence, it is likely to lead to further deterioration in the bilateral DPRK-PRC relationship.

From a strategic standpoint, going into the talks, the DPRK Ministry of Foreign Affairs stirred international confusion with its one-sentence announcement that North Korea was in the final stage of preparations for the launch of reprocessing operations at Yongbyun. It was the kind of provocative statement that should have scuttled the talks even before they had a chance to convene, but it did not. Was it a trial balloon designed to gauge possible international response to the impending North Korean action? Was it an attempt to raise the stakes in the nuclear standoff? Was it another example of the North Korean blackmail and brinkmanship right on the eve of important talks in order to squeeze more concessions from Washington? My guess is that it was none of the above.

The Big Question: When will the canary die in the mine?

The North Koreans have come to the nuclear Rubicon now, both in technical and political terms. They are ready to cross what they know is one of the U.S. red lines, i.e., the start of reprocessing operations. By publishing the MOFA announcement, they are giving the United States an advance notice that if the Beijing talks fail, we will go ahead and start reprocessing. We are ready to cross the nuclear Rubicon now.

If this analysis is correct, then what do the North Koreans expect from the trilateral talks in Beijing? In the past, they used to say: "If the United States acts in reason, the nuclear issue of the Korean Peninsula may be settled smoothly." In particular, "the DPRK has willingness to clear the U.S. of its security concern if the latter recognizes the DPRK's sovereignty, assures the DPRK of non-aggression including non-use of nukes by concluding a legally binding non-aggression treaty, and does not stand in the way of the DPRK's economic development," (ii).

But, in the past couple of months, Pyongyang seems to have lost much interest in genuine negotiations with the United States. Now Kim Jong Il's position is basically "leave us alone." These days the North Koreans often reiterate: "there is no need for the DPRK to threaten or blackmail anyone to "get its system guaranteed" or receive any "economic reward" (iii). They grudgingly dropped their three initial demands, namely recognition of sovereignty, no hinderance to economic development, and a non-aggression pact. On April 6, 2003, the DPRK MOFA issued a statement declaring that "even the signing of a non-aggression treaty with the U.S. would not help avert a war. Only the physical deterrent force, tremendous military deterrent force powerful enough to decisively beat back an attack supported by any ultra-modern weapons, can avert a war and protect the security of the country and the nation" (iv).

Increasingly, they assert that "now that the United States is seeking to attack us by force of arms, we have no choice but to take strong counteraction against it...There is no place for us to step back and we have nothing to make a concession to the United States," (v). Moreover, the North Korean

leaders bluntly warn: "If the United States continues military pressure as it is now, the present situation will lead to catastrophic explosion" (vi). They stress "the DPRK neither wants a war nor avoids it." Pyongyang informs Washington "we will increase our self-defensive power in every way to cope with the prevailing situation no matter what others may say," (vii). They further warn: "the army and the people of the DPRK will counter confrontation with confrontation and an all-out war with an all-out war." They defiantly put the world on notice that "the DPRK will be compelled to take a self-defensive measure when it thinks that the U.S. preemptive attack is imminent," (viii).

The Iraqi war led the North Korean leaders to conclude that "the UNSC's discussion of the Iraqi issue was misused by the U.S. as an excuse for war. The Iraqi war shows that to allow disarming through inspection does not help avert a war but rather sparks it. Neither international public opinion nor the U.N. Charter could prevent the U.S. from mounting an attack on Iraq." Pyongyang warns Washington that "the U.S is seriously mistaken if it thinks that the DPRK will accept the demand for disarming while watching one of the three countries the United States listed as part of an "axis of evil" already subject to the barbarous military attack," (ix).

Now, what do all these official pronouncements mean for the trilateral talks in Beijing? This is hardly posturing or brinkmanship. These official statements reveal the fact that Kim Jong Il does not expect any breakthrough or quick settlement at these talks. Nor is he prepared to make any substantive concessions to President Bush at this time. I would go even further and speculate that Kim Jong Il has probably given up on George W. Bush as a reliable and trustworthy counterpart and any expectation of a "new bold approach" from the "Bush mandarins." Kim Jong Il may well have decided that he could not deal with President Bush personally, and, therefore, he had to wait it out until the next U.S. president would come to power, before he would re-engage in any meaningful dialogue with the United States, like he had previously done with the former ROK President Kim Yong Sam. Hence, Kim's main negotiating objective appears to be to buy time until the administration change in the White House while avoiding escalation of tensions and judging the U.S. intentions in the meantime.

Second, if the North Koreans seriously believe that "the U.S. is going to invade the DPRK after the end of the Iraqi war, using the U.S. military exercises in the South as a momentum," (x) then, the KPA needs some advance warning about the upcoming U.S. attack. Apparently, the North Korean government hopes that when international talks are under way, no American bombs will fall on Pyongyang. It is only the U. S. break-off of the talks with the North that will send a meaningful signal to the senior DPRK leaders that aggression may be imminent. This is the canary in the mine argument: When the canary in the mine dies, it means that there is little air left for miners to breathe and their turn may be next unless they rush to the exits to escape.

Finally, by coming to trilateral talks in Beijing, Pyongyang may be trying to set Washington up in case of future escalation. If the United States decides to disengage from the talks unilaterally at some point, like it did at the United Nations on the eve of the Iraqi campaign, such a unilateral move in contrast with the demands of China, ROK, Russia, and Japan may spark international condemnation and contribute to the international delegitimization of any U.S. military action against the North and raise international concerns about the overall U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula in the eyes of the international community.

Very low expectations, escalation will continue

Here is Kim Jong Il's game plan in Beijing. Treat the Chinese intermediaries as a pro-American party at the talks, which should be viewed as a two against one boxing match. Give both, the PRC and the United States, an advance notice about pending initiation of reprocessing operations. Tie down Washington at the negotiation table and buy time for military build-up at home. Watch for the

"canary in the mine" to die as an early warning signal about possible American attack. Last, frame the United States up in a way delegitimizing any U.S. unilateral military action against the North in the eyes of the international community.

Where does it leave Washington? I would argue that the Bush administration is well on track in applying its Reagan solution to the North Korean situation. The breakdown of Chinese-North Korean military alliance and growing cutoff of China's assistance to the North contribute greatly to Washington's goal of strangulating the North economically and politically and accelerating its implosion from within. Now, finally, China and America appear to be willing to enforce the idea of a non-nuclear Korean peninsula, with both sides getting closer to working together to oust Kim Jong Il's regime as the main factor of regional instability in Northeast Asia. Now the United States can present a real ultimatum to North Korea in the presence of Chinese witnesses - disarm and open up or else, with China's tacit support behind the scenes for further action in case of the North Korean non-compliance.

In the end, the Beijing trilateral talks contain all the ingredients for a spectacular diplomatic disaster. If Washington and Pyongyang choose to exchange a series of home-made ultimata in front of the Chinese interlocutors and leave the room until further notice, the world will have to ready itself for the possibility of rapidly escalating military confrontation on the Korean peninsula in the near future, when the notice comes due without notice. There will be no Shufeldt Two Treaty of Peace, Amity, and Navigation between the United States and North Korea, despite ardent Chinese intermediation.

Endnotes

- i "The Rodong Sinmun," Pyongyang, April 2, 2003
- ii KCNA, Pyongyang, February 20, 2003
- iii KCNA, Pyongyang, March 4, 2003
- iv Statement of the DPRK MOFA Spokesman, KCNA, Pyongyang, April 6, 2003.
- v The Rodong Sinmun, Pyongyang, February 25, 2003
- vi The Rodong Sinmun, Pyongyang, February 19, 2003
- vii The Minju Chosun, Pyongyang, March 1, 2003
- viii KCNA, Pyongyang, March 1, 2003
- ix Statement of the DPRK MOFA, KCNA, Pyongyang, April 6, 2003
- x KCNA, Pyongyang, April 1, 2003

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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