

Policy Forum 02-05A: North Korea's Latest Nuclear Gambit

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North Korea's Latest Nuclear Gambit

By Andrew Mack

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I. Introduction

This essay focuses on the consequences and future implications of relations between North Korea and the United States given the North Korea's surprise admission of a clandestine nuclear weapons program via enriched uranium. It argues that the United States is in a lose-lose foreign policy situation due to potential accusations of hypocrisy (vis a vis its foreign policy with Iraq) and accusations of wrongful appeasement. While it remains unclear why North Korea chose now to reveal its nuclear weapons program, the essay asserts that Pyongyang stands to gain much potential political leverage over the United States, as war is not an option, and neither is permitting Pyongyang to continue its uranium enrichment program.

Andrew Mack is Director of the Human Security Center at Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia and author of the study, *Proliferation in Northeast Asia* (Stimson Center, Washington DC, 1996).

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Nautilus Institute. Readers should note that Nautilus seeks a diversity of views and opinions on contentious topics in order to identify common ground.

II. Essay by Andrew Mack

"North Korea's Latest Nuclear Gambit"

By Andrew Mack, Institute for Global Issues, University of British Columbia

With last week's surprise admission that it is pursuing a new clandestine nuclear weapons program, North Korea has once again leveraged itself into the world's headlines and created a huge diplomatic headache for the United States.

Pyongyang's revelation places Washington in a very awkward position. Its fiery rhetoric about the need to use force against 'rogue' states that have nuclear ambitions is now coming back to haunt it. North Korea has a far worse record as a perpetrator of international terrorism than Iraq, its political system is just as repressive, it has chemical and biological weapons, and its nuclear weapons program is far more advanced.

Yet Washington says that it wants a peaceful resolution to the challenge posed by North Korea's nuclear program, while arguing that only war and regime change can resolve the Iraqi nuclear threat. Critics from both left and right are unimpressed, but for quite different reasons.

Conservatives are asking why the Bush Administration isn't taking just as tough a line against Pyongyang as it is against Baghdad. Opponents of war with Saddam ask why military action should be necessary against Iraq, while diplomacy is all that is needed to deal with a North Korea that is much further down the nuclear track.

The answer is simple. For the US, war with Iraq is possible; war with North Korea is not.

The last major nuclear crisis on the Korean peninsula erupted in 1994 after the North had been caught extracting bomb-making plutonium from spent reactor fuel from its 5 megawatt research reactor at Yongbyon. At the time there was much talk in the US and Seoul of 'surgical strikes' against these nuclear facilities.

Cooler heads prevailed - and for good reason. 'Surgical strikes' would almost certainly have

unleashed very unsurgical war. Seoul lies within artillery range of the North/South border and the death toll could have run into hundreds of thousands. With 37,000 US armed service personnel in South Korea the specter of massive US casualties loomed large.

Fortunately, the 1994 crisis was defused by a peace-making mission to Pyongyang led by Jimmy Carter. The North subsequently agreed to freeze its nuclear operations in exchange for the provision of two proliferation-resistant light water reactors from a consortium of countries led by South Korea and a supply of heavy fuel oil from the US which would be provided until the reactors came on line.

Conservative critics were outraged. Pyongyang was being rewarded rather than punished for breaching its obligations under the NPT not to make nuclear weapons.

The critics were right. It was an unfortunate agreement and it created a worrying precedent. But it was also the least-worst option. It avoided war and it stopped a nuclear weapons program that, within a very few years, would have produced enough surplus fissile material for the cash-strapped North Koreans to export to other pariah states - like Iraq.

Optimists believed that with the nuclear threat removed, the international community could afford to sit and wait for the North, whose economy was in free fall, to either reform or collapse.

We now know that while the US and its allies were breathing a collective sigh of relief, Pyongyang was busy planning to acquire fissile material for nuclear weapons via a very different route, one that required neither a reactor, nor a reprocessing plant.

This time, the bomb-making material was highly-enriched uranium which the US suspects is being produced with gas centrifuge technology provided by Pakistan in exchange for North Korean ballistic missiles. Pakistan, a US ally in the war against terrorism, has denied the charge.

It is not really surprising that the North should have embarked on a new quest to produce fissile material using a less detectable technology than its original plutonium program. Indeed rumors about clandestine uranium enrichment facilities have been circulating for years. Nuclear weapons provide a deterrent against what Pyongyang sees as the threat from the US and South Korea. They also provide a lot of political leverage.

The real surprise is that the regime has admitted what it was doing. North Korea could have simply refused to fess up - and issued its usual shrill denials.

So why the new openness? No one knows for sure. Much of the impact of the new revelation has been highly negative. China, South Korea and Japan have all expressed outrage and economic and political ties will be severely strained. But in admitting that it has a nuclear program the North has also gained considerable potential political leverage in its dealing with the US.

If not stopped, the uranium enrichment program will provide more fissile material than the North needs for its own weapons program, raising the deeply worrying prospect that surplus fissile material could be exported to countries like Iraq, or even terrorist organizations.

Confronting this nightmare prospect the US has few palatable choices. Military action is no longer a serious option, not least because Washington believes that the North may already have one or two nuclear weapons produced from plutonium from its first nuclear weapons program. Pyongyang may not yet have been able to build small enough warheads to fit on its SCUD missiles, but it could easily enough build a fixed nuclear device and emplace it in a tunnel underneath the De-Militarised Zone that divides North from South.

Conventional war on the Korean peninsula would be disastrous; war with nuclear weapons is simply unthinkable.

For the US this only leaves diplomacy. But here the North can once again 'play the nuclear card' - offering to scrap its new nuclear program and with it the risks of fissile material exports, in exchange for political and economic concessions from the US and South Korea.

Will playing the nuclear card again work for the North as it did in 1994? Probably not. But either way it creates an unpleasant dilemma for Washington.

If the Americans play the North's game and buy off the new nuclear program, they will be accused of hypocrisy and appeasement. If they don't there is little else they can do to stop Pyongyang from acquiring a major nuclear arsenal.

A North Korea awash with surplus fissile material and a desperate need for foreign currency, in a world of would-be proliferator states that have money but no fissile material is not an encouraging prospect.

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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Nautilus Institute

608 San Miguel Ave., Berkeley, CA 94707-1535 | Phone: (510) 423-0372 | Email:

nautilus@nautilus.org