

Policy Forum 02-18A: North Korea's Nuclear Program: An Assessment Of U.S. Options

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North Korea's Nuclear Program: An Assessment Of U.S. Options

by Steve LaMontagne

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I. Introduction

The analysis below is by Steve LaMontagne, senior analyst at the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation in Washington, DC. LaMontagne notes that the Bush administration faces the same set of policy options as did the Clinton administration in the early 1990s when North Korea threatened to pull out of the Non-Proliferation Treaty: War, Isolation, or Diplomacy. While war and isolation entail considerable risks, diplomatic negotiations may find little support on Capitol Hill and among administration hawks who bristle at the thought of being blackmailed by Kim Jong Il. The key test of the administration's commitment to a diplomatic solution to the North Korea nuclear problem will be whether or not it abandons diplomacy at the first sign of stubborn, erratic, or objectionable behavior by North Korea. If this happens, diplomacy could eventually give way to the threat of military action.

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II. Essay by Steve LaMontagne

"North Korea's Nuclear Program: An Assessment Of U.S. Options"

By Steve LaMontagne

Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation in Washington, DC

North Korea's recent admission that it has continued to pursue a nuclear weapons program in violation of the 1968 Non-Proliferation Treaty, the 1992 Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and the 1994 Agreed Framework caught the United States off guard and startled the world. As the Bush administration endeavors to mount a coordinated international response, it is important to consider the status of North Korea's nuclear program, possible reasons for its disclosure, and the implications of various response options.

Status of North Korea's Nuclear Program

When Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly visited North Korea in early October, he presented his counterparts in Pyongyang with U.S. intelligence suggesting that North Korea had sought and acquired materials necessary to build gas centrifuges to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. Pakistan may have provided key assistance to North Korea, possibly as a quid pro quo for ballistic missile technology allegedly received from Pyongyang in the late 1990s. Russia and China may also have provided assistance to North Korea, although both countries deny it.

The Bush administration has not officially stated whether it believes North Korea has actually built gas centrifuges, used them to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU), or assembled complete weapons. Recent reports suggest that Pyongyang's enrichment program is in its early stages. However, there is also a strong presumption in the intelligence community that North Korea may possess one or two nuclear bombs containing plutonium produced before the 1994 Agreed Framework froze Pyongyang's plutonium program. Expressing his personal view, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld said, "I believe they [North Korea] have a small number of nuclear weapons." However, the definitive answer to this question may not be known until Pyongyang admits to having such weapons, shows them to U.S. officials, or worse, conducts a nuclear explosive test.

North Korea's Motivation

It is difficult to discern the motivation behind North Korea's surprising confession. Bush administration officials described the tone of North Korean officials as "assertive, aggressive" and even "belligerent." However, the announcement does not seem to have been interpreted as an explicit threat against the United States.

North Korea has been unhappy with the pace of negotiations with the Bush administration, and moreover alarmed by the administration's harsh "axis of evil" rhetoric and the new U.S. doctrine of preemption. This doctrine asserts the right to use military force against rogue regimes seeking weapons of mass destruction before those regimes can harm the United States. Pyongyang interprets it as a threat of U.S. nuclear "first use" on the Korean peninsula. Its nuclear admission could therefore be intended as a response to a hard-line shift in U.S. policy and a warning to the United States against preemptive action. Alternatively, the admission could represent a new attempt by North Korea to extract additional economic aid from the United States and other countries.

It is quite possible that North Korea decided to disclose the existence of its nuclear program in an effort to "come clean" about violations of its international nonproliferation commitments. This apparent new policy of "confessional diplomacy" has manifested itself in other instances. After a June 29, 2002 naval battle with South Korea threatened to derail relations with Seoul and Tokyo, Pyongyang expressed regret over the incident and sought to put discussions back on track. At a summit with Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi in September, North Korea confessed to kidnapping 13 Japanese citizens during the 1970s and 1980s, and has since allowed the surviving abductees to visit their families in Japan. By publicly airing its dirty laundry, North Korea may be trying, albeit clumsily, to extend an olive branch to its neighbors and the United States.

Options for U.S. Response

The Bush administration essentially faces the same set of options as did the Clinton administration in the early 1990s when North Korea threatened to pull out of the Non-Proliferation Treaty: War, Isolation, or Diplomacy.

War In the near term, the Bush administration has ruled out the option of military action against North Korea. Pyongyang commands an army of 1.1 million soldiers in addition to possibly hundreds of short-range SCUD ballistic missiles capable of delivering chemical or biological payloads to South Korea. The South Korean capital, Seoul, lies just 25 miles from the demilitarized zone, well within the range of thousands of North Korean artillery pieces. Although North Korea would eventually lose, any new war would certainly result in massive U.S. and South Korean casualties and wreak devastation on South Korea. Furthermore, U.S. armed forces are preoccupied with the war on terrorism and the impending showdown with Iraq, making it extremely difficult to sustain military action on a third front, especially one as potentially bloody as the Korean peninsula.

Isolation A policy of isolation would cut off economic assistance and political contact with North Korea in the hopes that Kim Jong Il's regime will either change its behavior or collapse. This is also a risky policy that is uncertain to succeed and could backfire. First, Kim Jong Il has displayed surprising resilience. At the time the Agreed Framework was signed in 1994, some U.S. officials believed that the North Korean regime was on the verge of collapse. Instead, Kim Jong Il seems to have strengthened his position and has begun to aggressively court diplomatic relations with other countries both in and outside the region.

Second, if shut off from the rest of the world and the prying eyes of weapons inspectors, North Korea could embark on a crash program to build a few nuclear weapons, either through enriching uranium or by extracting weapons-grade plutonium from spent fuel that was sealed and stored under the 1994 Agreed Framework. Faced with the imminent collapse of his regime, Kim Jong Il could decide to take South Korea or Japan with him. Even without nuclear weapons, Kim Jong Il might not go quietly.

Diplomacy In light of North Korea's recent efforts to reconcile with Japan and South Korea, to improve relations with other countries, and to experiment with free market economic mechanisms, there are promising opportunities for diplomatic solutions to the crisis. One option is to negotiate a successor agreement to the 1994 Agreed Framework, one that hinges future political and economic ties on complete North Korean disarmament and robust nuclear inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).

In fact, despite the loud calls for its abolition, some parts of the Agreed Framework are still worth saving. First, it has verifiably frozen North Korea's plutonium program and placed spent fuel from its plutonium production reactors into secure storage under continuous IAEA monitoring. If not for the Agreed Framework, North Korea might have dozens of nuclear bombs today instead of possibly one or two.

Second, as a political accord, the Agreed Framework outlines a step-by-step path towards normalization of ties between the U.S. and Pyongyang. The process includes North Korean implementation of the Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and full compliance with its IAEA safeguards agreement under the Nonproliferation Treaty. These requirements must remain central to any diplomatic strategy the Bush administration pursues.

A new agreement modeled after the 1994 Framework, however, will find few enthusiastic supporters on Capitol Hill and among administration hawks. For this growing crowd of vocal opponents, the idea of offering any political and economic incentives to North Korea in exchange for its complete disarmament represents a foolish continuation of Clinton-era "appeasement" policies. The prevalent attitude on Capitol Hill can be summarized as "Fool me once, shame on you; Fool me twice, shame on me."

Current Outlook The Bush administration is seeking, at least initially, to resolve the crisis through diplomacy. It is important to note that the administration may well have been aware of North Korea's efforts to build a uranium enrichment program when it conducted its review of its North Korea policy shortly after entering into office in 2001. According to media reports, the U.S. intelligence community had been collecting evidence of suspicious activities in North Korea since 2000, possibly even earlier, and had begun to connect the dots by the time President Bush was elected. If the administration was briefed on this intelligence during its policy review in 2001, its decision in May of that year to engage North Korea on a broad range of issues suggests that diplomacy was never in doubt.

After North Korea's revelation, President Bush dispatched Under Secretary of State John Bolton and Assistant Secretary Kelly to China, Russia, South Korea, and Japan to coordinate an international response, beginning with statements expressing concern and condemnation of North Korea's nuclear program. The statements will include key demands:

- North Korea must completely dismantle its nuclear weapons program as well as all weapons of mass destruction in its possession.
- North Korea must also allow IAEA weapons inspectors complete and unrestricted access to all

nuclear facilities so that disarmament can be monitored and verified.

- North Korea must promise not to export or transfer weapons of mass destruction, delivery systems, or related technologies and materials to any country, group, or individual.

Initial diplomatic efforts have already borne fruit. President Bush and Chinese President Jiang Zemin publicly agreed on the importance of a "nuclear-free" Korean peninsula and on the need to resolve the issue peacefully. In a trilateral statement, the United States, Japan, and South Korea used similar language, demanding that North Korea dismantle its nuclear program in a "prompt and verifiable manner." Leaders attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit held October 26-27 in Mexico issued a statement calling on North Korea to "visibly honor its commitment to give up nuclear weapons programs."

U.S. efforts to adopt harsher language elicited mixed reactions, as did proposals to suspend economic assistance and political contacts with North Korea until it makes visible progress on the above demands. Although Japan will curtail normalization and withhold the bulk of economic aid to North Korea until the nuclear issue is resolved, bilateral talks are proceeding as scheduled. South Korea has rejected the use of economic sanctions against North Korea and may even increase the level of economic cooperation with Pyongyang.

Although the administration refuses to explicitly declare the 1994 Agreed Framework dead, Secretary of State Colin Powell stated that North Korea regards the agreement as nullified, and therefore that the United States is not obligated to continue construction on the promised light water reactors or to provide regular heavy fuel oil deliveries to Pyongyang. Other economic assistance packages have been temporarily shelved. The United States is, however, considering allowing future fuel oil shipments to proceed.

Contrast with Iraq Policy The U.S. approach to North Korea stands in stark contrast to its policy on Iraq, another member of President Bush's "axis of evil" ruled by an oppressive dictator seeking nuclear weapons. In the case of Iraq, the Bush administration has won from Congress and is seeking from the United Nations authorization to use military force against Iraq unless Saddam Hussein disarms completely. The inconsistent policies have prompted commentators to point out the irony of urging military action against Iraq, which does not yet possess nuclear weapons, and diplomacy in the case of North Korea, which may already have them.

Administration officials assert that it is unwise to adopt a "cookie cutter" foreign policy. Different challenges to international security require responses precisely tailored to individual circumstances. Five differences between Iraq and North Korea can explain the Bush administration's inconsistent policies towards two members of the "axis of evil."

- North Korea's military is much stronger than Iraq's, creating a deterrent effect on the United States.

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- North Korea has never used weapons of mass destruction, while Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons both against Iran during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War and against the Kurdish populations in Northern Iraq. Also, North Korea has not started a war in over 50 years, while Iraq has started two in the last 25. Therefore, although North Korea is militarily stronger than Iraq, Saddam Hussein may be more dangerous.

- Iraq may have ties to terrorist organizations with global reach such as al Qaeda, while North Korea probably does not.

- North Korea has made notable efforts to integrate itself into the international community by experimenting with free-market economic policies and making diplomatic overtures to South Korea, Japan, and several other countries. Iraq, by contrast, has shown no interest in working for peace and stability in the Middle East.

- Iraq threatens key U.S. economic interests in the Middle East, while comparatively fewer economic interests are at stake on the Korean peninsula.

Next Steps As the United States continues to pressure North Korea to give up its nuclear program, it must also press Pakistan to fully investigate allegations that it provided crucial assistance to North Korea, and secure a commitment that no transfers, including those involving spare parts or technological assistance of any kind, will take place in the future, regardless of whether or not they took place in the past. The Bush administration should seek similar commitments from other countries, such as China and Russia, with spotty records on proliferation.

The key test of the administration's commitment to a diplomatic solution to the North Korea nuclear problem will be whether or not it abandons diplomacy at the first sign of stubborn or erratic behavior by North Korea, behavior that is bound to surface at some point, if not frequently, during negotiations. North Korea is intent on using its nuclear program as a bargaining chip in discussions with a U.S. administration that is in no mood to bargain.

While the hope is that North Korea will respond to a delicate balance of carrots and sticks, if incentives prove unattractive to North Korea or politically untenable at home, then the U.S. will have to warn of clear consequences should North Korea choose not to comply with international demands. Despite the preference for a diplomatic solution, such an ultimatum could lead to a policy of isolation, and ultimately the use of military force.

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