

Policy Forum 02-09A: Pyongyang's Dangerous Game



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Pyongyang's Dangerous Game

by Timothy Savage

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I. Introduction

The following essay is by Timothy Savage, Nautilus Associate and Visiting Fellow at the Institute of Far Eastern Studies, Kyungnam University, Seoul. Savage draws on a previous Nautilus workshop on scenarios for the future of US-North Korean relations (<https://nautilus.org/security/Korea/index.html>) to examine the security situation following North Korea's revelation of a clandestine uranium enrichment program. He notes that all four scenarios developed at that workshop postulated some sort of crisis with the Agreed Framework, but the outcome of the scenarios differs greatly depending on how the various countries respond. He argues that we have reached a crossroads on the Korean peninsula, and that the scenarios can provide a helpful roadmap of where the future might lead.

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 Timothy Savage

"Pyongyang's Dangerous Game"

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With the revelations about its nuclear program, North Korea has once again demonstrated its capacity to force the United States to pay attention, thwarting any attempts to make "benign neglect" the preferred policy prescription for dealing with Pyongyang. While U.S. intelligence discoveries may have sparked the current standoff, it is unlikely that that was the Bush administration's intentions when Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly presented his evidence to DPRK officials in Pyongyang. According to some newspaper reports, some members of the Bush administration wanted to avoid going public with the revelations, and were forced to do so only after threats of press leakage. North Korea has in the past shown a capacity to deny even the most incontrovertible evidence, consequently, North Korea's decision to own up to its clandestine activities has the markings of a strategic calculation. Whether it was a major miscalculation remains to be seen.

A few months ago, the Nautilus institute gathered together a diverse group of experts to examine the future of US-DPRK relations. Over the course of three days in two separate sessions, the participants developed four distinct scenarios for how events might play out over the next ten years. Interestingly, all four of these scenarios posited some sort of crisis in the Agreed Framework. How all the major players responded was largely determined by the way each scenario then developed. These scenarios were not meant to be predictive, so the degree to which the details of the stories we developed match the current situation is unimportant. Nonetheless, these scenarios can help illustrate how this issue may unfold, depending on the actions taken by the countries involved.

In the first scenario, GRIDLOCK, the Agreed Framework collapses and North Korea pursues its nuclear program undeterred. Japan then follows suit, as does eventually South Korea. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty collapses as the United States decides it is in its interest to have nuclear-armed allies. The result is a new Cold War in a Northeast Asia awash in nuclear weapons.

The danger of this scenario developing cannot be easily dismissed. If either the United States or North Korea proves unwilling to negotiate to end the latter's nuclear weapons program, the Agreed Framework will collapse. Without it, North Korea can quickly un-can the stored fuel rods to begin

extracting plutonium, allowing it to build up a nuclear force far more quickly than would be possible through uranium enrichment. North Korea claiming status as an acknowledged nuclear weapons state could easily sound the death knell for the Non-Proliferation Treaty, which has already been greatly weakened by the South Asian nuclear tests and Washington's retreat from disarmament.

The Japanese public, already reeling from the abduction revelations, might find a nuclear-armed Pyongyang to be the perfect cure for their own "nuclear allergy." South Korea would not want to remain as the sole non-nuclear state in Northeast Asia, and thus would be under enormous pressure to mount its own nuclear development. While China, Russia, and the European Union would resist these developments, there would be little they could do to prevent it.

In the second scenario, which we named, "GREAT LEADER III," the United States wants to end the Agreed Framework while the ROK wants to continue it. This eventually leads to a break in the alliance as Washington pursues a belligerent policy toward Pyongyang while Seoul continues down the engagement path. The end result of this scenario is a growing US disengagement from Northeast Asia while South Korea moves closer to China and North Korea.

It is possible to see the beginnings of this scenario unfolding. South Korea has already begun to shift in a more continental direction in its economic planning, seeking to become an Asian "hub" while rebuilding its links with the Eurasian mainland by reconnecting its railroad with that of North Korea. The ROK's popular disaffection with the U.S. hardline stance on North Korea was evidenced by the protests that sprang up in response to US President George W. Bush's "axis of evil" speech and has not yet entirely abated. The revelations of North Korean cheating will certainly help the case of the critics of engagement, but a lot will depend on the outcome of the South Korean election, which is far from certain at this point. Opposition leader Lee Hoi-Chang is currently running ahead in the polls, but he has been unable to push his support above the 35 percent mark, leaving him vulnerable, especially should the other two candidates, ruling party nominee Roh Moo-hyun and Hyundai scion Chung Mong-joon, somehow agree on a merger.

In the third scenario, PHOENIX, the Agreed Framework collapses, but China prevails upon the United States not to respond militarily. Instead, the two countries cooperate to isolate North Korea economically and politically. Eventually, this forces an implosion of North Korea, leading to a German-style reunification with South Korea.

This scenario could come about if North Korea continues to prove intransigent in alleviating concerns about its nuclear weapons program. While China would certainly prefer to avoid isolating North Korea, it is also not going to be pleased with Pyongyang continuing attempts to destabilize the region with its nuclear shenanigans. If North Korea cannot be prevailed upon to straighten up and fly right, Beijing's fourth generation leadership, too young to have fought in the Korean War, may decide to cast its lot with Washington rather than continue to support such an irksome ally. Should the United States wish to pursue a policy of containment and isolation, it will need the help of both China and Russia, as it cannot close down North Korea's borders otherwise.

In the final scenario, named RAINBOW, the crisis is averted through new negotiations, resulting in US normalization of relations with North Korea, in exchange for a verifiable end to North Korea's nuclear program. The result is an overall reduction of tensions in the region and an inflow of development aid from a variety of quarters.

If the statements coming out of Pyongyang are to be believed, this scenario may be what North Korea was hoping for when it revealed the uranium enrichment program. Indeed, offers to negotiate away the weapons program in exchange for U.S. abandonment of its "hostile policy" toward Pyongyang would seem to fit in perfectly with this scenario. Such a solution will be a difficult sell in

Washington, however, where any new concessions to North Korea will be seen as rewarding bad behavior. It will be up to North Korea, if it really wants to bring this scenario about, to make major progress in demonstrating its sincerity regarding its willingness to verifiably dismantle its weapons program. Should North Korea even permit the International Atomic Energy Agency to begin inspections tomorrow, it will take some time for verification to reach the point where engagement once again becomes a viable political alternative in the United States. In the meantime, North Korea will have to hope that South Korea, China, Japan, and others remain willing and able to continue with enough support to keep North Korea afloat until Washington is ready to move forward on normalization.

As I stated at the beginning of this discussion, these scenarios are not meant to be predictive, and it is entirely likely that the future will actually follow some combination of the above paths. It is clear, however, that we have reached a critical juncture for the future of the Korean Peninsula. The decisions that are made now will determine the chances for building a true and lasting peace in Northeast Asia.

The Executive Summary of the Nautilus Institute's "Scenarios for the Future of US-North Korean Relations Engagement, Containment, or Rollback?" can be found at:
<https://nautilus.org/security/Korea/DPRKScenarios.html>

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.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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