

Policy Forum 03-10A: Security Dilemma, War Trap, and the South Protectorate over the North



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By Alexandre Y. Mansourov

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I. Introduction

Dr. Alexandre Y. Mansourov argues that as the security dilemma facing the United States and North Korea in the current nuclear standoff aggravates, they increasingly fall into the war trap. Although Pyongyang and Washington talk peace, neither side has the interest nor will to negotiate at the present time. Instead, they are both stuck in the escalation mode and actively prepare for war. Dr. Mansourov suggests that perhaps, in the long run, a South Korean protectorate over the North Korean state, encompassing the areas of national security and foreign policy, can bring about peaceful resolution of the escalating nuclear crisis and guarantee peace and stability on the nuclear-free 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

"Security Dilemma, War Trap, and the South Protectorate over the North"

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As the war of words between the United States and North Korea intensifies, the real intentions of both sides become more obscure. Far from being clarified, the message from both sides gets increasingly muddled. Do they still jockey for a better bargaining position at the start of bilateral negotiations whenever the latter may be launched? Or, are they inescapably falling into the war trap?

The fundamental reality of the unfolding U.S.-DPRK nuclear crisis is that both sides completely lost trust in each other. On one hand, Kim Jong Il's credibility in Washington is below zero. On the other hand, the U.S. President George W. Bush is again public enemy number one in Pyongyang. Almost all inter-governmental agreements and mutual understandings binding North Korea and the United States together are torn apart and thrown away. Arguably, the bilateral relationship is at its nadir. Pyongyang and Washington talk peace, but, indeed, they actively prepare for war. It is obvious that both sides are still in the escalation phase, clearing the debris leading toward the warpath.

One of the more disturbing developments of the week is a whirlwind of whispers at the in-the-loop dinner tables around the Beltway that the United States Secretary of Defense, who calls the North Korean government a "terroristic regime," appears to be pressing his top military brass to come up with innovative plans for using force preemptively against the DPRK's nuclear sites, "should things go wrong." The rumor has it that Secretary Rumsfeld really meant what he said when he stated that the United States was prepared to fight two wars (against Iraq and North Korea) simultaneously, with corresponding directives being worked out at the operational level. To reiterate, these are just rumors; but, as the old adage goes "there is no smoke without fire."

One has to assume that some contingency planning for a military option in Korea is well under way at this point. Of course, one may object by saying that the Pentagon has all sorts of plans for all sorts of contingencies and updates them frequently, if circumstances warrant it. What appears to be different this time is the growing political will to inject real life into these contingency plans and increasing determination at the White House to use force, if needed, to stop North Korea from going nuclear.

In response, North Korea threatens new missile tests, possibly, a nuclear test, and ultimately a preemptive attack against the U.S. Forces in Korea and its allies to prevent the U.S. military buildup on and around the peninsula in anticipation of the U.S. preemptive strike against its own Yongbyun nuclear facilities. To counter the threat of preemption with preemption of its own is the ultimate and seemingly inevitable outcome of the traditional security dilemma facing Pyongyang and Washington.

In classic international relations theory, the security dilemma simply means that statesmen cannot risk NOT reacting to the security actions of other states, but that in so reacting, they can produce circumstances that leave them worse off than before. This happens because in an anarchical world of self-help an increase in one state's security decreases the security of others; in response, the others increase their own security, which offsets any initial advantage. As a result, a vicious action-reaction cycle sets in motion. Ultimately, arms race and security competition tend to lead to the highly destabilizing and trigger-happy preemption-counter-preemption threat environment. Pyongyang and Washington rapidly approach the moment of truth in their nuclear standoff.

How can we stop the escalation of tensions? In Washington, one can often hear the argument that if Pyongyang is seriously interested in a negotiated resolution of the nuclear stalemate, why cannot Kim Jong Il at least send some kind of a meaningful signal to the international community that his nuclear program is aimed at nuclear energy generation only, not bomb-making? The DPRK MOFA's statement of February 5, 2003, declaring that the North Korean "nuclear activity would be limited to the peaceful purposes including the production of electricity at the present stage" is not convincing enough, they say. We need deeds, not just words.

To be more specific, some experts suggest that, following the spirit (if not the letter) of the 1992 DPRK-ROK Denuclearization Declaration and capitalizing on the burgeoning thaw in the inter-Korean relations cemented by the election of President Roh Moo-hyun, the North Korean Dear Leader Kim Jong Il could invite a goodwill expert delegation from the ROK to tour the Yongbyun nuclear complex to see that all 8, 017 spent fuel rods are still kept in place at the storage site and that the reprocessing plant is still properly shut down. Or, he could invite an expert delegation from such "friendly" countries as China and Russia to visit the Yongbyun nuclear facilities to reaffirm to the world that despite the removal of international safeguards there is no illegal activity under way there yet and, hence, his peaceful intentions. Alternatively, he could direct his government to start building electricity transmission lines around the Yongbyun area, which again could be possibly interpreted as a meaningful sign that he wants to generate electricity, not to reprocess plutonium. Consequently, the advocates of direct negotiations with the North within the Bush administration could rely on either one of these steps to strengthen their call for the early resumption of bilateral dialogue and a negotiated solution with Pyongyang.

This approach appears to be reasonable at first sight, but it misses the point from the North Korean perspective. It is obvious that Pyongyang is not interested in negotiations for the sake of negotiations as such. To get the talks going is not the goal in itself. The goal is to obtain the outcome agreeable to the North Korean government, i.e., congruent with the national interests of the DPRK and the self-preservation interests of the North Korean ruling regime.

North Korean leaders are not stupid. They are rational statesmen and pragmatic politicians. They

believe that there is little sense and use in just sitting down at the negotiation table when one party appears to have neither genuine interest nor willpower to negotiate. They also believe that if and when the United States does decide to sit down and talk, as long as Washington is preoccupied with the Iraqi operation, the Bush administration is likely only to present a laundry list of numerous well-known demands ranging from nuclear disarmament to respect for human rights and will do little else but preaching to the North on how to behave itself in the family of nations. It goes without saying that this approach will do nothing to address the North Korean security concerns and economic needs in the process of negotiations. But, as soon as the Iraqi conflict is over, Washington is likely to use some lame excuse to declare that it is impossible to reach any agreements with Pyongyang and to proceed to increase all-out pressure on the North. As a result, again the DPRK will be left with no tangible gains and with the credibility of its deterrent potential undermined. Therefore, Pyongyang has no intention of sending any meaningful signals about its readiness to engage in negotiations with Washington at the present time.

Conversely, North Korean leaders believe that their bargaining strength is derived from mounting strategic and tactical ambiguity. They think that the United States drove itself in a tight corner: the Bush administration is not willing to negotiate, but it is afraid of using force to contain the North Korean nuclear build-up. At the same time, Washington will lose face if it agrees to a non-aggression pact after repeated rejections of Pyongyang's proposal. That is why Kim Jong Il is certain to increase pressure on the Bush administration in the weeks and months to come.

What is the North's ultimate goal in this regard? It is no longer food nor fuel at this stage of the confrontation. It is simply: U.S. abandonment of North Korea. Senior North Korean officials tell all special envoys visiting Pyongyang these days that all they want is to be left alone and that the Dear Leader is determined to push the confrontation to the brink and beyond to this end. They try to convince their visitors that Koreans are ready to die for their "way of life and freedom of choice." They say, "Leave us alone to live and develop our nation the way we want to without anyone's dictate." In the diplomatic language, they demand the U.S. recognition of the DPRK's sovereignty, guarantee of non-aggression, and no U.S. hindrance to their economic development.

But, Washington does not buy this argument. The Bush administration believes that the North is afraid of being abandoned and forgotten by the international community because of its economic woes. It needs foreign cash to sustain its regime, feed its population and the military. Hence, they say it is just another ruse to be coupled with nuclear brinkmanship to draw the United States to the negotiation table.

Although the White House is obviously not interested in any escalation of tensions in Korea while the United States is pre-occupied with Iraq, the Bush administration is clearly in no rush to re-engage the DPRK. There are plenty of partisan accusations of inconsistent North Korea policy, as practiced by the Bush team: first - the White House pledged "we won't talk," then - "we will talk but not negotiate," then - "we will not negotiate but our proxies may," and, finally, now - "we will negotiate if they satisfy our demands first." These minor linguistic contortions and perceived policy inconsistencies reflect an ever-lasting paradigm of this administration that it will not make any deals with the DPRK under the alleged nuclear blackmail or threat of extortion until North Korea disarms first. The 2003 Presidential State of the Union address and recent congressional testimonies by Richard Armitage and Colin Powell can be viewed as the latest most authoritative reassertions of this position. And, since there is little likelihood that Pyongyang is going to disarm preemptively and unilaterally, the only way to resolve this nuclear crisis is the regime change to be forced by either internal implosion accelerated by the U.S.-led international isolation or imposed by the U.S.-led military defeat. There is no change in strategy here.

Despite seemingly incoherent pronouncements from the White House, the information war against

North Korea is in full swing. Major U.S. news media claim that international attempts at intermediation appear to be faltering, including recent well-publicized Russian and Australian efforts, as well as the ROK President Special Envoy Lim Dong-won's "humiliating" mission to Pyongyang. The Washington Post alleges that the DPRK's July 1 economic reforms came to a screeching halt and began to rapidly unravel, thereby worsening the economic crisis facing the nation this winter (read: Kim Jong Il's domestic support is weakening and his clock is ticking). The New York Times alleges that Kim Jong Il may be preparing a golden parachute and looking for political asylum in his hometown in Siberia.

If anything, the U.S. government is rumored to have recently doubled its efforts to persuade the Chinese government to "pull the plug" on the North Korean regime. To this end, the Bush administration is willing to go a few extra miles to satisfy some of the well-known Chinese concerns. Washington is said to have given strong indications to Beijing that it would share the burden of absorbing the bulk of North Korean refugees expected to flood the northeastern parts of China in the wake of collapse of Kim Jong Il's regime (see, for instance, the "80-10-10" congressional initiative in the upcoming U.S. House of Representatives). Also, Washington is rumored to be considering the giving of some kind of assurances to Beijing that the U.S. troops stationed in Korea would not be redeployed to the northern part of the Korean peninsula, following the Korean unification. Finally, every senior U.S. emissary to Beijing makes it very clear to the new Chinese authorities that China will play ball in Korea and will really determine the limitations and opportunities of U.S.-PRC strategic cooperation in the future. At the same time, American officials do not shy away from demonstrating their "bewilderment" and "displeasure" at the Chinese for their lack of enthusiasm and seeming unwillingness to step up their pressure on Pyongyang. The bottom line is that the United States is determined to tip the balance in its favor and persuade Beijing that the benefits from close cooperation with Washington on the North Korean nuclear issue well outweigh the costs of its diplomatic and economic support for Pyongyang.

In Washington, it is fashionable these days to draw all sorts of red lines, which North Korea must not be permitted to cross. Some suggest that if Pyongyang reloads the spent fuel rods into the plutonium reprocessing plant, this should constitute a *casus belli* for the United States. Alternatively, others believe that while the United States could tolerate Pyongyang's move to load the existing Five Mwe nuclear research reactor with fresh fuel rods, if, down the road, North Korea attempts to unload that reactor of the newly spent fuel rods on its own without the presence of international safeguards, then such a step should constitute a *casus belli* for Washington. Still others go even further by suggesting that any North Korean attempt to move any of the 8,017 spent fuel rods from the storage pond should constitute a red flag. To be fair, the Bush administration appears to be acting with some caution in this regard and has yet to come out with its own version of the U.S. red lines for the North Korean nuclear activities.

As I listen to these dire warnings broadcast on CNN, I think that Kim Jong Il will probably cross all these red lines at the moment he learns that the United States would seriously consider them as a *casus belli*. In my opinion, the North Korean government is still in the escalation mode in this crisis, looking for ways to up the ante and to aggravate tensions with the United States. Therefore, at this point, Pyongyang is likely to react to any red flag postings as a raging bull agitated by toreador's scarlet tunic in a blood-thirsty corrida.

To be sure, on the constructive side, there are plenty of discussions about possible diplomatic ways out of the current standoff, looking beyond the current stance of the Bush administration threatening Pyongyang with international isolation and demanding "disarmament first, and negotiations later." There is a "Grand grand bargain" idea, i.e., a US-DPRK "Helsinki-type compromise," which would encompass the North Korean WMD programs, missile program,

conventional weapons, and human rights issues, in exchange for the U.S. security guarantees, energy and food aid, economic assistance, political and diplomatic normalization, and so on. In my opinion, this idea is too much to swallow for any capital even under the most favorable circumstances.

Alternatively, some less ambitious and more down-to-earth people propose a "more for more" solution, envisioning, in essence, the return to the agreed framework to be strengthened by the freeze on the DPRK's highly-enriched uranium (HEU) program and full-scope immediate verification procedures in exchange for more conventional energy aid and immediately improved overall relations. I do not believe that Pyongyang will accept this premise, since, from their standpoint, they will be asked to give up significantly more in exchange for much less.

Finally, there are some folks with obvious nostalgia for the "good old days" of the agreed framework: they urge a return to the status-quo ante prior to Jim Kelly's October visit to Pyongyang and recommend the resolution of the HEU controversy on the basis of the Kumchang-ri precedent. I believe they should open their eyes wider and accept the fact that their time is gone forever.

How can we escape from falling into the war trap? The chances for a "magic bullet" solution are deemed to be very low, despite some hopes in certain quarters that some disgruntled KPA generals might dare to stage a palace coup in line with a centuries-old Korean tradition of military coups. There does not seem to be any "golden shake" solution in sight either, despite Kim Jong Il's renewed interest in visiting his birthplace in Russia from time to time. Any hope that "personal chemistry" or "man-to-man conversation" may help resolve the current crisis is dashed by the ominous reality that President Bush and Chairman Kim personally loathe each other, and, therefore, should not be even left alone in one room.

Despite some offers of intermediation, both Russia and China are by and large reluctant to interject themselves in the U.S.-DPRK bilateral standoff. Russians say, "All roads lead to Rome." Beijing echoes this attitude by citing an old Chinese adage, saying "A lock can be opened only with one key." In other words, they tend to support Pyongyang's rejection of the "internationalization of the nuclear issue" for now and caustically point to Washington as the modern day Rome holding the sole key to Pyongyang's nuclear door.

Thus, the newly elected government of the ROK must step up to the plate and start to play a central role in finding and negotiating a mutually acceptable and face-saving way out of the present nuclear standoff, despite recent diplomatic setbacks. For it is the Republic of Korea that stands to lose the most should the escalation of tensions between the United States and the DPRK lead to an outbreak of full-scale hostilities on the peninsula. President-elect Roh Moo-hyun should use the current nuclear crisis as a unique historical opportunity to fundamentally reshape the inter-Korean relations and radically redefine the missions of the ROK-U.S. military security alliance in the future. President Roh needs to develop path-breaking strategic vision, which will guide the entire Korean nation in the South and North on the path toward national unification. Sunshine is warm and bright, but paternal protectionism is rich and glorious.

It is time to advance conceptually the idea of establishing a South Korean protectorate over its North Korean sibling. The indisputable fact of life is that the North is poor, weak, and insecure, whereas the South is rich, strong, and self-confident. The Northern ruling elite wants to drive a wedge between the South and the United States in order to alleviate its threat perception and insecurity. If they ask for it, you give it to them and plenty and more. As a big brother nation, South Korea can share its wealth, offer developmental model, grant some sense of legitimacy, and guarantee protection from external forces to its insecure and dilapidated little brother in the North. Only the South has to take the North Korean demands seriously and, in turn, can guarantee the

North's security and assist in economic development. The only sacrifice the North will have to make is to accept some practical limitations on its sovereignty, including in such strategic areas as WMD development, which is nothing new for those who studied the history of the North Korean-Chinese and North Korean-Soviet relations. After all, if Korea is indeed one, as Koreans like to stress, it is all one nation, one family business. In the long run, the South Korean protectorate over the North in the realm of national security and foreign policy may become the first step in the multi-stage process of peaceful transition to a unified Korean state.

Over the past fifty years, the ROK has come a long way to develop as an advanced capitalist economy, open globalizing society, and maturing liberal democracy. Now it is time to redefine its security posture for the post-post Cold War era and extend its foreign policy to protect, not contain or deter, its Northern neighbor. Will such strategic re-orientation of Seoul damage its military security ties with Washington and undermine the U.S. global and regional interests, especially in the areas of WMD proliferation, regional stability, promotion of democracy and human rights? I do not think so. Furthermore, is it not that intensified South-North dialogue and comprehensive cooperation leading to Korean unification constitute one of the fundamental U.S. goals on the Korean peninsula? The United States must trust its ROK ally to do the right thing even without Washington's minute meddling in the day-to-day management of the inter-Korean affairs.

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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