

Policy Forum 03-44A: The North Korean Nuclear Challenge And American Interests: Getting The Priorities Right



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Nautilus Institute Policy Forum Online: The North Korean Nuclear Challenge And American Interests: Getting The Priorities Right

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The North Korean Nuclear Challenge And American Interests: Getting The Priorities Right

by Avery Goldstein

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I. Introduction

The paper below is by Avery Goldstein, Professor of Political Science at the University of Pennsylvania and Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute. Goldstein argues that while an agreement guaranteeing a "nuclear-free" North Korea would be desirable for the United States, there remain other strategic outcomes that fall short of that goal but may nonetheless prove advantageous to US interests in reducing the risk of the spread of nuclear materials.

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 Avery Goldstein

"The North Korean Nuclear Challenge And American Interests: Getting The Priorities Right"
By Avery Goldstein, Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute.

The six-party talks about the future of North Korea's nuclear weapons program that convened in Beijing during August 2003 began a process that is certain to be both politically difficult and technically complex. The chief question now is where such talks should lead. Answering this question requires not only considering the various possibilities and deciding which one would best serve US interests.

It also requires figuring out whether an acceptable outcome is realistic. The art of politics is often about necessity as much as preference, and this harsh truth is nowhere more evident than in the rough and tumble world of international politics. In discussions about the Korean nuclear problem, however, the US as well as other concerned parties have clearly indicated that their goal, sometimes portrayed as the only acceptable goal, is a verifiably nuclear-free North Korea. Achieving this goal may not be feasible. But it may also not be necessary. Indeed, I suggest that it would be a strategic mistake of the first order to eschew an agreement that fails to guarantee a "nuclear-free North" because there are outcomes that fall short of this goal that will nevertheless serve important US interests. To understand why, it is essential to consider the nature of the North Korean nuclear challenge and the nature of American interests. These can be sorted out by recognizing that the current efforts to address the North Korean challenge are likely to lead to one of three broad outcomes-- stalemate, escalation, or negotiated agreement.

THREE FUTURES

Stalemate.

One scenario for the negotiations, and the easiest to anticipate, is a continued stalemate as the discussions drag on or are temporarily suspended between rounds because Pyongyang or Washington objects to the statements or actions of the other. Essentially, inconclusive talks preserve the status quo, a tense standoff in which North Korea proceeds with its opaque, though no longer clandestine, nuclear program. Following a variation on the Asian communist negotiating strategy of the mid-20th century, "talk, talk, build" may even be the reason Pyongyang agreed to discussions that at least postpone preventive military strikes by the US. Stalemate that permits the North to move forward with its nuclear program would pose grave threats to American security though, as will be explained below, not mainly because it would lead to North Korea possessing nuclear weapons.

Escalation.

A second broad possibility is escalation. If the negotiations break down because the US or North Korea no longer sees them as productive, either side might believe that its interests require an alternative to diplomacy that raises tensions. For Pyongyang, the most plausible alternative is not a suicidal attack on South Korea or US forces and allies in Asia, but rather a clearer demonstration of (or perhaps a more credible bluff about) its nuclear capability to dissuade threats from those it believes would otherwise challenge its security. If the DPRK has not yet succeeded in weaponizing its nuclear potential, it may stop short of testing a weapon and simply feed worrisome intelligence to attentive observers that convinces them a weapons capability exists or could quickly be realized. If the DPRK, as the CIA has estimated, possesses a very small number of working nuclear bombs, then Pyongyang might test one in a fashion that maximizes the coercive benefit and minimizes the risks-announcing the test only after it succeeds and is detected.

For Washington, two coercive alternatives have received the lion's share of attention-preventive military strikes against the North's nuclear installations and tough sanctions. The preventive war option amounts to relying on an update of the plans for surgical strikes that the Clinton Administration contemplated prior to concluding the 1994 Agreed Framework with Pyongyang that was supposed to provide a road map for ending the North's nuclear weapons program. The technical feasibility of such strikes is debatable (US weapons are more accurate and lethal than ever, but doubts remain about the adequacy of targeting intelligence and the predictability of collateral damage). As important, the political desirability of preventive strikes remains low, especially because US allies as well as the Chinese have raised strong objections. Unless such an attack is both technically effective and also does not trigger significant military or political turmoil in the region, the US must anticipate that the price of its action will be a sharp deterioration in relations with the most important countries in East Asia who have counseled against it.

Beijing worries mainly about the prospect of an even larger flood of refugees across the Yalu River if US military action compounds the economic desperation that already drives North Koreans to seek safety in China. Beijing also recognizes the potential harm to its reputation, at home and abroad, if it failed somehow to respond to American strikes in its front yard that it had previously labeled unacceptable. Japan and especially South Korea worry mainly about the possibility that North Korea might, however unwisely, decide to retaliate rather than serenely live with the results of a US attack. Although Pyongyang may not actually have much with which to threaten Japan, the unlikely but catastrophic possibilities weigh more heavily there than in Washington. And South Korea operates on the assumption that the artillery just north of the DMZ gives Pyongyang a clear capability to inflict massive casualties on the population and infrastructure of Seoul, no matter how

effective strikes against the nuclear installations may be. The risk of North Korean military retaliation against the ROK is, to put it mildly, substantial and an important reason why a preventive, "surgical" strike is so unpopular in the South. This risk also explains why the announced redeployment of American troops away from the DMZ (so that their vulnerability will no longer limit the freedom of a US president who might want to launch strikes against the DPRK) worries the people and government in Seoul who aren't going anywhere. It is worth noting, however, that this reaction to the planned redeployment while understandable, has been overly alarmist. After all, given the large numbers of Americans living and working in Seoul, the risk of conventional retaliation against the city means that any responsible US leader would still have to include their lives among the possible costs if he is considering whether to initiate a preventive war to destroy the North's nuclear installations. It is unlikely that the President would be greatly comforted by the knowledge that thousands of relocated troops were safe while tens of thousands of American civilians were in harm's way.

Taken together these considerations lead to the following conclusion about the first US option for escalation: Contingency planning for the use of American force in a preemptive strike (if intelligence warns of an imminent North Korean attack against US and allied interests) has always been necessary and relatively uncontroversial. By contrast, contingency planning for the use of American force in a preventive strike (before an imminent threat has been detected) remains a hard sell in the region. Ignoring the preferences of Seoul, Tokyo, and Beijing as the US considers its options if negotiations collapse, is a luxury that the world's sole superpower can indulge, but not without consequences.

The second coercive option for the US if it decides to abandon negotiations and escalate, is the imposition of a strict set of sanctions against Pyongyang that includes economic and political isolation combined with a military quarantine tightly controlling what flows into and out of the DPRK. Although less provocative than a preventive military attack, effective sanctions would bite deeply and raise the risk of an unpredictable reaction from the North. While it seems even more unlikely that Pyongyang would opt for suicidal military action as a response to sanctions than to attack, the small possibility of spiraling tension that produces an unlikely outburst remains a concern. And short of this unlikely scenario, China is again likely to object to, and perhaps blunt the effectiveness of, tough sanctions because it worries that a further deterioration in the economic health of the sickly North Korean economy will add to the disruptive burden of economic refugees it has already absorbed over the past decade. This is in fact the concern that has largely shaped Beijing's reluctance to use its substantial economic leverage (as a crucial source for food and fuel) over North Korea to coerce Pyongyang in recent years, despite its otherwise cooperative role in international efforts to reduce tensions on the peninsula.

Agreement.

A third possible outcome of current efforts is a negotiated agreement. To serve US interests, of course, such a deal could not simply be a reprise of the 1994 Agreed Framework. That bargain forestalled escalation and may have slowed the North's progress towards developing warheads and the missiles to deliver them. Ultimately, however, it differed little from the stalemate outcome, described above, insofar as it failed to effectively address the challenge of a North Korean nuclear weapons program that either never ceased or secretly resumed at the turn of the century. With the Agreed Framework's inadequacy as background, what would constitute a more acceptable agreement? The US representative to the current negotiations has stated that the US goal is the verifiable, complete, and irreversible elimination of the North Korean nuclear program. As desirable as this goal may be, it will be nearly impossible to craft an arms control agreement that guarantees

this level of perfection. This high standard has proved elusive even among parties that trust each other more than do the US and North Korea. Technical solutions like challenge inspections, as some have suggested, can increase confidence about compliance. But the US negotiating position that calls for unfettered free access to any facility anytime anywhere within a sovereign state's borders is the sort of demand that even open societies balk at, let alone an insular regime like the one in North Korea. Should the US, however, settle for an agreement that falls short of the rigorous, but unachievable, standard of near perfection? The answer depends on whether the type of agreement that can be crafted serves US interests better than either continued stalemate or escalation. More specifically, the answer depends on recognizing that the US has multiple interests at stake and that it is necessary to establish priorities among them.

US INTERESTS AND PRIORITIES

As noted above, the US has publicly insisted that its top priority is the complete elimination of the DPRK's nuclear weapons capability. This position reflects not only the long-standing nonproliferation policy of the US dating to the 1960s, but also more recent security concerns that emerged after the Cold War and especially after 9/11. American policy now aims to prevent states like North Korea (initially labeled "rogue states", then briefly "states of concern," and finally members of the "axis of evil") from possessing weapons of mass destruction because (1) they might use such weapons to threaten American interests, (2) they might transfer them to anti-American terrorists; and, (3) because the appearance of such new nuclear weapons states is expected to weaken the norm against nuclear proliferation and provide incentives for those who feel threatened to respond by pursuing their own deterrents. For two reasons such concerns are especially acute in the North Korean case. First, Pyongyang's past behavior reflects a dangerous combination of callous indifference to human suffering and recklessness in dealing with the outside world as well as a willingness to engage in illicit commerce to garner revenue the North's economy cannot supply. Second, the advent of an openly nuclear North Korea would increase likelihood that Japan and perhaps South Korea and Taiwan would decide to pursue their own nuclear capabilities. Some worry that this sort of domino effect would trigger regional arms races and increase tensions among the states of East Asia destabilizing the entire region. Most would prefer not to find out if this worry is justified.

While the publicly stated top priority for the US is a nonnuclear North, the not-so-secret second priority is regime change in Pyongyang that would make a "nuclear relapse" unlikely. The US seeks regime change, then, not only out of humanitarian concerns about an unreformed communist dictatorship that seems unconcerned about the fate of its own people, but also because it believes that a different sort of regime would not have the same interest in acquiring nuclear weapons that the current rulers have displayed. An insecure dictatorship locked in the armed confrontation that prevails on the Korean peninsula and obsessed with the tenuousness of its own survival may see nuclear weapons as the only affordable and dependable security guarantee. A less reclusive, more secure regime that has a stake in the benefits of peace and regional stability, especially the economic benefits, is expected to calculate differently and conclude that the many costs of nuclear weapons far exceed the less necessary military benefits.

The good news about these two American priorities-- denuclearization and regime change in North Korea-- is that there is broad multilateral support for both, most importantly even from China. All five participants joining North Korea at the current negotiations have endorsed the goal of a nonnuclear Korean peninsula. China has some of the strongest concerns about the fallout from an openly declared North Korean nuclear capability. At a minimum Beijing worries that it would further strengthen support for missile defenses in Tokyo, Taipei, and Washington that challenge China's own conventional and nuclear deterrent, especially as it applies to the prospect of a crisis in the Taiwan

Strains Beyond this concern about the future architecture of American-sponsored missile defenses, Beijing worries that DPRK nuclear weapons would create a security context in which Japan or Taiwan might be able to justify pursuing their own nuclear deterrents. In short, China's self-interest leads it to share the American preference for a nonnuclear North Korea.

And while diplomacy precludes being very explicit about the question of regime change, all five of North Korea's counterparts at the talks also favor a transformation of the DPRK. Even China, though rejecting the American democratization agenda and the use of US military power to effect change, sees the nature of the current regime in Pyongyang as part of the problem. Since at least the mid-1990s Beijing's leaders have been trying, without much success, to persuade the DPRK to embrace a North Korean version of the reforms that have changed China over the past quarter century. China, like the US, believes that an economically developing and more open North Korea would shed its confrontational posture and lose its appetite for nuclear weapons. In addition, such a reformed DPRK would be less of an economic burden on China and generate fewer refugees swarming in China's already troubled Northeast.

The bad news, unfortunately, is that even such broad multilateral support for the top two American priorities is unlikely to get Pyongyang to sign and comply with an agreement ensuring verifiable denuclearization and progress on fundamentally reforming the DPRK. Worse still, allowing the negotiations to collapse because these goals prove unattainable may foreclose an agreement that would in fact serve American interests, indeed one that would serve what should arguably be the top US priority-reducing the risk that North Korea can become a facilitator of nuclear terrorism.

NORTH KOREA AND THE DANGER OF NUCLEAR TERRORISM

In the early 21st century, it is the danger of nuclear terrorism, not the danger of new nuclear states that should drive American proliferation policy. The greatest danger from North Korean nuclear weapons is not the risk that Pyongyang will decide to use them, that it will transfer them to others, or that responsible states in the region will react by developing their own arsenals. Without arguing that these are not matters of concern, I suggest that the greatest danger is that an unregulated North Korean nuclear program will increase the availability of materials that terrorist organizations interested in weapons of mass destruction now seek. Strategy always requires setting priorities and often entails accepting the trade-offs among them that may not be pleasant, but are viewed as wise. Deciding that the prevention of nuclear terrorism should be the top American priority alters the nature of the sort of agreement with Pyongyang that is acceptable. Why do I suggest that the US should accept an agreement that does not verifiably eliminate the North's nuclear weapons? Wouldn't such an imperfect agreement leave open the possibility that the weapons might be transferred to terrorists?

First, logic and history lead most analysts to agree that the US can deter North Korea from using its nuclear weapons. Even the most hawkish American observers believe that the rulers in Pyongyang, however ruthless, are not interested in taking steps that jeopardize their survival. They are not religious fanatics; they are dictators whose top priority is ensuring their grip on power. Second, it is very likely that the US can deter North Korea from transferring nuclear weapons to others, including terrorists. Even if the financial reward might be great, the risks for the supplier create daunting obstacles to such a transaction. State leaders face the possibility that the sale of whole weapons to terrorists would be detected or later traced to them. If the link is established, perhaps even if it is only suspected, the supplier knows it would become a target of retaliation (maybe the only identifiable target for an enraged victim) should the terrorist groups that they do not control ever

use the weapons. By contrast, while the US can deter nuclear states and dissuade them from supplying nuclear weapons to terrorists, the US cannot confidently deter the terrorists themselves. As has often been stated, threats of retaliation may be ineffective because it is difficult to identify the target when facing an "an adversary without a home address" and perhaps unreliable because some religious terrorists are indifferent to the material concerns that motivate the leaders of territorial states. If one cannot dissuade the adversary by convincing him to refrain from attack, one must instead seek to reduce his ability to carry out the attack. Given the difficulty of anticipating the time, place, and method by which terrorists may choose to strike, and given the horrifying consequences of such a strike if it includes the use of nuclear weapons or even a less sophisticated radiological weapon that could contaminate vital political and economic centers, it makes sense to focus on preventing these groups from acquiring the capability. Successful prevention requires one to think about the way terrorists will try to acquire weapons of mass destruction. One must also assume that they will cleverly try to reduce the chance that their plans will be foiled.

Eager to minimize their own vulnerability to detection before mounting a strike, terrorists typically put a premium on decentralization. Intelligent terrorists are unlikely, then, to concentrate their efforts on the implausible hope of finding a state prepared to sell a potentially traceable nuclear weapon. The more plausible, and worrisome, approach is that terrorists will cast their net widely, acquiring components for their weapons of mass destruction from multiple sources. They might seek weapons expertise from the underemployed nuclear science diaspora that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet Union, seek detonators and other hardware through seemingly isolated transactions in Europe or elsewhere. And, most importantly, one can imagine widely dispersed efforts to acquire small amounts of radioactive or fissile materials from many sources. A North Korea cranking out weapons grade plutonium or enriching uranium that is harder to "count" and easier to smuggle or sell than whole weapons, would become one source for the nuclear materials terrorists seek. Whatever their precise blueprint, terrorists will try to fly under the radar for as long as possible and only late in the game organize the more detectable efforts at weaponization of a "dirty bomb" (if that is all they can achieve) or a real nuclear bomb (unlikely but undoubtedly desired). Viewed from the perspective of preventing nuclear terrorism, then, the chief danger from North Korea's nuclear program is the prospect that it might yield a large enough surplus of radioactive materials that terrorists would see it as place where they might find individuals willing to engage in small scale transfers others are unlikely to detect.

With this concern as a top priority, an agreement with North Korea that falls short of fully verifiable denuclearization serves US interests if it reduces the easily envisioned terrorist danger. Such an agreement should be designed to maximize the effectiveness of counterterrorism efforts (reducing the opportunities for the transfer of radioactive materials), even it cannot ensure that the DPRK has been deprived of its nuclear deterrent. The inspection regime that the agreement establishes should focus mainly on ways to hamper the ability of the North to produce radioactive materials that could wind up in terrorists hands. The best way to do this is to establish rules that so tightly constrain North's nuclear production capacity that its own interest in preserving a deterrent (latent or hidden) reinforces the fear that any illicit transfers may be detected.

Because Pyongyang sees a nuclear weapons potential as the ultimate security guarantee, the scarcer its nuclear resources and the more difficult they are to retain after the imposition of inspection rules set up by an agreement, the more strongly motivated Pyongyang will be to husband them rather than sell them off. Moreover an agreement, even one under which doubts persist about the North's currently opaque nuclear deterrent, would also have the benefit of at least muting the alleged proliferation incentives for Japan or Taiwan because it would be viewed as a step away from, not towards, an openly declared, fully deployed, DPRK nuclear arsenal. But most importantly, the result would leave the US with the much easier challenge of deterring Pyongyang from using whatever

minimal capability it might already possess and from taking the risk of retaliation associated with the transfer of its meager nuclear patrimony to terrorists.

Some might argue that it is premature to settle for such an imperfect agreement and insist that genuine denuclearization is a realistic goal. Although it would be useful to have this goal embodied in the language of the agreement, especially because it would justify inspections that serve the counterterrorism priority described above, it seems unlikely that North Korea will actually forfeit all of its nuclear deterrent capability. Why? After all, advocates of denuclearization will note that other states have abandoned their nuclear ambitions and even dismantled deployed capabilities, some as a result of outside pressure. Their experience, however, suggests precisely why one should not expect North Korea to follow in the footsteps. The DPRK's situation is unlike that faced by other states who sincerely agreed to give up a nuclear deterrent within their grasp (or that others believed was nearly within their grasp). Governments that have willingly sworn off nuclear weapons have been those that decided they did not face an imminent threat or believed they had an alternative to deal with such a threat. Some of the prime examples are instructive:

* Ukraine allowed its arm to be twisted into trading the nuclear weapons it inherited from the Soviet arsenal in return for economic assistance, but under circumstances where the military threat from a weakened and preoccupied Russia seemed distant.

* Taiwan and South Korea gave up (or at least postponed) realizing an emerging nuclear potential when their essential American ally who provided an extended deterrent insisted that the programs be terminated.

* South Africa dismantled the small arsenal it had secretly produced once the rationale for the deterrent (an asymmetrical answer to the potential threat from the "frontline" states possibly backed by the Soviet Union and its Cuban proxies) evaporated along with apartheid.

By contrast, facing a powerful adversary (the US) whose conventional capabilities it cannot match, the DPRK, unlike Ukraine, is convinced it faces an immediate and serious threat. Unlike South Korea and Taiwan, the DPRK rightly calculates that it has no powerful ally who will extend a deterrent umbrella. And unlike South Africa, the DPRK does not plan to undertake the sort of regime change that would eliminate the reason it perceives a threat to its survival from a militarily superior power.

Given its circumstances, therefore, one should expect Pyongyang to sign only an agreement that it is confident will not effectively prevent it from keeping a deterrent. Such an agreement may very well be one under which the North appears to trade away its current nuclear capability in return for economic and political benefits, and may even be one in which it consents to inspections. But given the powerful incentives for it to retain its most effective means for dissuading powerful adversaries from acting on what it assumes are hostile intentions, it is unlikely that the elements and even the weapons that are traded away will include all of the North's unknown nuclear potential, or that the inspections it accepts will be more than the ones that Pyongyang is confident it can manage (i.e., limit).

By the high standard of verifiable, full denuclearization that the US has publicly insisted is necessary, such an agreement under which the DPRK might secretly maintain a deterrent is unacceptable. But if one believes that the top priority for the US should be an agreement that reduces the risk of nuclear terrorism that will increase if the inventory of dangerous materials in North Korea grows, then the focus should be on minimizing the North's production capacity. An agreement that leaves the DPRK with a covert, perhaps only latent, nuclear capability can still constrain the North to carefully husband rather than market its scarce uranium or plutonium and any weapons components it may secretly possess. Even as negotiators should seek the sort of fully

effective denuclearization that has been publicly vetted (especially since the more stringent the deal that is struck, the tighter the constraints against which the North will have to operate), an agreement that falls short of perfection should not be rejected if it enhances efforts to limit the catastrophic, if not likely, danger of nuclear terrorism. Diplomacy that produces a carefully crafted but imperfect agreement can reduce the most vexing threat the DPRK nuclear program poses and leave the US military with the much easier challenge of deterring Pyongyang from using or selling whatever weapons capability it may possess.

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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