

Policy Forum 03-15A: The Reagan Solution to the North Korean Puzzle: Strategic Benign Neglect and Back-breaking Arms Race



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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 03-15A: The Reagan Solution to the North Korean Puzzle: Strategic Benign Neglect and Back-breaking Arms Race", NAPSNet Policy Forum, March 03, 2003,
<https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/nautilus-institute-policy-forum-online-the-reagan-solution-to-the-north-korean-puzzle-strategic-benign-neglect-and-back-breaking-arms-race/>

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PFO 03-15: March 3, 2003

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By Alexandre Y. Mansourov

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I. Introduction

Alexandre Y. Mansourov argues that Kim Jong Il is engaged in a two-level game whereby his domestic political and economic considerations are as important to him, if not more, as the signals, which he sends to and receives from the international community. The author believes that at the current stage of confrontation, Kim Jong Il is not interested in any sort of negotiations with the United States. Kim wants the Bomb, and North Korea will do its utmost to become a nuclear state, whether it will officially declare it outright or not. On its part, Washington refuses to negotiate with Pyongyang because it pursues a Reaganesque strategy, reminiscent of the old Cold War days, of mounting international isolation and an escalating arms race that will hopefully lead to an implosion of the bankrupt North Korean state. The author argues that the real danger from such an uncontrolled escalation of tensions is an accidental outbreak of hostilities contrary to the real intentions of all the parties concerned. Mansourov outlines the initial steps to be required to jump start constructive negotiations between Pyongyang and Washington at the time of total mutual distrust, zero credibility, and personal enmity among leaders. Mansourov is Associate Professor of Security Studies Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

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

"The Reagan Solution for the North Korean Puzzle: Benign Neglect and Back-breaking Arms Race"

By Alexandre Y. Mansourov

Associate Professor of Security Studies Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies

Now that the DPRK has officially restarted its mothballed 5 Mwe nuclear reactor, it is high time to check the pulse of what is happening in Pyongyang in the aftermath of the notorious "Kelly moment of truth," to assess where Washington's policy toward North Korea seems to be going, and what its Northeast Asian neighbors may think about it.

First, it is clear that despite five years of increasing openness to the outside world, North Korea remains quite an enigma for those of us who attempt to understand internal political and economic dynamics in the communist nation. Many legitimate questions are left unanswered. For instance, do economic reforms legalized in July 2002, albeit de-facto under way since 1998, falter, let alone face the prospect of reversal, or charge ahead despite the recent aggravation of geopolitical tensions and virtual cutoff of external economic aid? In other words, how does the North Korean regime intend to respond to the renewed need to mobilize the nation's resources for defense build-up aimed at deterring the heightened U.S. nuclear threat under the deteriorating economic conditions of

skyrocketing inflation, growing hidden unemployment, and dwindling supply of goods and credit? Will Kim Jong Il attempt to restore state control, centralized planning, and public ownership over the entire economy? Or, will the North Korean dominant elites choose to continue their pursuit of the mercantilist policies that would make them wealthy on the market distortions of the ongoing socio-economic transition towards a semi-privatized rent-seeking society with limited growth opportunities. At last, is North Korea headed for a second severe macro-economic shock or sharp disruption in less than a decade, and will it suffice to break up its semi-feudal and rent-seeking society by discrediting its crony dictatorship and its supporters?

Second, it appears that Kim Jong Il has finally reversed his four-year old strategic course of pursuing a negotiated accommodation and full normalization of relations with the United States. But, it is not clear yet whether he chose to retreat his nation into its traditional state of hermit kingdom or to begin genuine preparations for war against the United States, no matter how suicidal it may sound? Alternatively, some people suggest that he bluffs and simply imitates a nuclear breakout in order to draw Washington to the negotiation table and extract new resources for his domestic needs.

I wonder, though, if Kim Jong Il is forced to pay some political price at home in terms of his domestic credibility and standing, especially in the eyes of the older generation of the WPK leaders and the Korean People's Army, as a result of the spectacular collapse of the Agreed Framework and abrupt breakdown of the DPRK-Japan normalization process. After all, the Dear Leader did step outside the bounds of the Great Leader's legacy and even went beyond his original mandate as the follower of his father's will when he indirectly criticized Kim Il Sung's actions in the late 1970s as far as the abductions of the Japanese citizens were concerned. There must be some fissures within the North Korean leadership in this regard and some erosion of domestic support for Kim Jong Il's leadership emerging as a result of his political miscalculations made in 2002 and re-accelerating economic downturn. Although it is premature to speculate if North Korea is anywhere closer to implosion and collapse today than it was five years or nine years or a decade ago, one could raise legitimate questions about how solid Kim Jong Il's personal power base remains to be among the North Korean elites and how commanding his personal charisma is in the eyes of the North Korean public in these days of escalating nuclear confrontation.

Is it possible that the Dear Leader chose to escalate the current nuclear crisis not necessarily to gain any bargaining advantage or leverage vis-à-vis the United States but in order to shore up his sinking domestic support and to rally his power bases firmly behind his leadership? It is plausible to speculate that Kim Jong Il may be rushing to "the other extreme" to be "the hardest of the hardliners," in order to appease his potential domestic critics, be it the die-hard conservative stakeholders from the KPA or more pragmatic isolationist skeptics from the "we told you so" crowd among the party and state bureaucracy. In order to restore his domestic credibility as the supreme defender of the Kim Il Sung nation, who would never sell out the Juch'e-style socialist fatherland to the barbarian Yankee imperialists, Kim Jong Il may have had to bite the bullet and ordered his government to go into an overdrive to reactivate and accelerate its nuclear and missile program, as well as to lift the ban on vilifying and demonizing the United States and Japan and to recast the image of America as the DPRK's number one enemy again.

We have very little substantive evidence to address these questions in any sort of authoritative manner. Therefore, the risk of misunderstanding of the North Korean leadership intentions and subsequent miscalculation of their capabilities and consequences of our actions remains very high and is bound to grow because of the North's resuming international isolation. To err on the side of caution, I would argue that Kim Jong Il is engaged in a two-level game at home and abroad whereby his domestic considerations are as important to him, if not more, as the signals, which he sends to and receives from the international community.

Frankly speaking, I do not expect the North Koreans to answer our call for negotiations, if we ever make it. Why? For they do not expect any substantive gains from negotiations at the current stage of the confrontation. With his "new thinking" justifying the need and benefits of the full normalization of relations with the United States and Japan totally discredited at home, Kim Jong Il is pre-occupied with rebuilding his domestic credibility and stature by acting like "the hawk of hawks." Moreover, he does not believe that the Bush administration will ever be seriously interested in finding a negotiated solution with him. If anything, Washington may consider the value of negotiations for the sake of buying time only until the Iraqi operation is completed. After that, the North Korean leaders assume the worst case scenario, namely, that the Bush administration is certain to walk away from the negotiating table and focus its military might "like a laser beam" on North Korea in its efforts to use the nuclear crisis to force regime change in Pyongyang. As a result, the North Korean government clearly chose to concentrate all its scarcely available resources on beefing up their deterrent capabilities to the most extent possible as fast as they can.

Across the ocean, one can witness a deepening split within the Bush administration regarding its Korea policy. The White House, National Security Council, the State Department, and DOD appear to have very different visions of how to resolve the North Korean nuclear problem. One should be cautioned, however, against counting too much on the almost daily administration statements allowing for the possibility of a quick fix. Indeed, although in public the Bush administration officials concede the possibility of negotiation, in private they stress the high-level absolutism, indicating that, "Bush and Cheney want Kim Jong Il's head on a platter" because "Kim is Korea's Hitler," but "not just now." Hence, many observers believe that the White House has a plan how to get Kim after Iraq.

What seems to be "the plan" here? One well connected former senior Clinton administration official speculated that the Bush hawks decided "to concede 5-6 nukes to North Korea (1-2 allegedly existing ones and 4-5 nukes that Pyongyang can manufacture in future if it decides to reprocesses the 8,017 spent fuel rods currently stored at Yongbyun) and play for the long haul." They hope that that will put the United States in a much stronger position to mount credible and unanimous maximum international pressure against North Korea, which should inevitably lead to the DPRK's isolation, collapse, and the South-led unification. At that time, Seoul is expected to "do the right thing and give up the North-made nukes."

I would refine somewhat the above crude assessment of the Bush administration strategy towards a rapidly nuclearizing North Korea. By and large, this strategy involves "strategic benign neglect" coupled with forceful arms race approach. Remember how the Cold War was won? Some people say it was the power of liberal democratic ideas and the Helsinki process that penetrated the Iron Curtain and brought down the Soviet colossus. But the key leaders in the Bush administration who served in the Reagan administration would disagree: they would argue that it was President Reagan's defense build-up and ensuing Soviet-American arms race that drove the old Soviet Union into financial crisis and eventual bankruptcy. At that time, Ronald Reagan did not trust the arms control agreements with the Soviets made during the Nixon-Carter era. At the same time, the strategic doctrine of MAD removed the military option off the table. So, the Reagan White House chose to isolate the Soviet Union internationally in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and to drive the Soviet state into bankruptcy by imposing on it intolerable economic burdens of supporting an escalating arms race, including the star wars program, without any end in sight. That is how Gorbachev was forced to surrender and the Soviet Union was toppled, as they see it.

Now, North Korea is another communist state that, they say, failed to live by its arms control commitments such as the agreed framework. But, despite obvious temptations, the United States cannot realistically use military force against the North because of the threat of mutually assured

destruction existing between the North and the South, key U.S. ally in Northeast Asia. The Bush White House chose to deny the benefits of Clinton-sponsored engagement to the North, so the gradual spread of liberal democratic ideas and Western trade will not be able to undermine the North Korean regime from inside. So what does the Reagan-clone Bush administration seem to have in store for North Korea? The answer is reminiscent of President Reagan's policy toward the former Soviet Union, namely mounting international isolation and escalating arms race hopefully leading to internal implosion of the bankrupt North Korean state. President Bush will not initiate a second Korean War, no matter what the North Korean leaders may fear. So, one should take at face value his promise "not to invade or attack" North Korea. But, President Bush will escalate by all means the arms race with the "evil regime" in Pyongyang to the point that will break the economic back of the North Korean state.

What will happen to the North Korean nukes, if any are found, at that point? The South will inherit them after unification without a single shot fired and, as a reliable American ally, is expected "to do the right thing" by turning them over to the United States for safe-keeping or destruction, like the former Soviet states of the Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan did in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse in the early 1990s.

In my opinion, this Reaganesque strategy designed to eliminate the "last vestige of the Cold War on the Korean peninsula" is the real reason why the Bush administration consistently refuses to negotiate with the DPRK government and appears to be so reserved in its criticism of the multiplying North Korean nuclear and missile provocations. One can almost hear the "so what?" question coming out of Washington these days. In response to mushrooming North Korean announcements that they intend to cross or have already crossed this or that perceived U.S. red line, one can interpret the astonishing silence or ambiguity on the part of the U.S. policymakers either as their benign neglect or silent challenge to the North to convince the United States and the world again and again that they can do more, to show to the West what they really can do in the nuclear area, and to do more, and more, and more until they break their own back in the pursuit of nuclear ambitions amidst deepening economic depression.

It is noteworthy that judging by the actions of the P-Five and all other countries involved in the nuclear dispute so far, a nuclear North Korea per se may not be unacceptable for them after all, despite possible second and third degree international consequences like a nuclear chain reaction in East Asia. For international responses to the DPRK's unilateral actions so far can be best described either as "passing the buck" or as "wishful thinking." It is clear that Russia is more worried about the Muslim bomb, especially in the hands of the Pakistanis, as a real threat to its national security than a Korean bomb. China stresses its "non-interference" policy vis-à-vis the North. South Korea claims that Americans purposefully "exaggerate" the DPRK's nuclear threat for extraneous reasons. Japan gratuitously cut off its own channels of communication with Pyongyang and continues to hide behind the U.S. back. And, the United States is self-absorbed in wishful thinking fantasizing that its foresworn enemy, North Korea, will unilaterally disarm first without losing any battle or war. Thus, all great powers appear to be so passive in the nuclear standoff on the Korean peninsula. Consequently, that leaves the North Koreans in the driver's seat in the current escalation of tensions.

I believe that the Reaganesque strategy of "strategic benign neglect and muscle-flexing" is risky business. For Kim Jong Il's nuclear breakout strategy is not a bluff. It is not a bargaining ploy. Nor is it negotiable for him at this stage. He wants the Bomb and North Korea will do its utmost to become a nuclear state, whether it will officially declare it outright or not.

At present, the Bush White House is playing cool. Perhaps, Washington was able to get Tokyo and Seoul on board in a sense of forming some common understanding among the allies that 5-6 nukes in

the hands of the North Koreans should not be viewed as sufficient legitimate rationale for either Japan or the ROK to go nuclear. Thus, the much feared nuclear chain reaction in Northeast Asia will be averted. Perhaps, some senior U.S. officials are convinced that the U.S. naval and air blockade of the North can successfully interdict any potential North Korean nuclear proliferation activities. Moreover, it is the Russians, and the Chinese, and the South Koreans, and the Japanese that must worry the most about one of their neighbor's going nuclear. Also, I am sure that the United States can successfully contain and deter North Korea despite recent escalation of tensions, as they did in the past half a century. But, what worries me the most is the possibility of miscalculation and accidental outbreak of hostilities on the account of escalating nuclear tensions.

This is why I believe that the United States must at least put to the test Pyongyang's declared willingness to give up nukes before conceding the fact that North Korea has already become a nuclear state. Washington must start dialogue with Pyongyang now, because there is a clear and imminent danger of North Korea's going nuclear in the next few months.

To reiterate my point, the United States needs to test the North Korean intentions, i.e., whether Pyongyang is seriously interested in bilateral talks. If we decide to talk seriously to North Koreans, we should not rely on any kind of multilateral forum to do the heavy-lifting to alleviate our security concerns. After all, will we fully trust any kind of deal made by the Russians and/or Chinese with Pyongyang ostensibly on our behalf but behind our back.

To clear the debris on the long road to talks, we should be mature enough to stop public threats, demonization and vilification of the North Korean leaders. To jump start the dialogue, we should not use the low-level diplomatic channels in New York, which proved to be practically useless, with all due respect; nor should we advance it through the now discredited venue of Special Envoy exchange. Bearing in mind the historic lessons of the Carter-Kim summit diplomacy that brokered the 1994 deal, if my father were a former president, I would reluctantly acquiesce to his selfless offer to undertake a tremendous personal risk and travel to a Confucian, albeit hostile communist, country, the DPRK, to meet with Kim Jong Il in order to restore a degree of personal trust between North Korean and American leaders, which was broken down in the past two years.

To achieve credible results, Washington would need to display genuine presidential leadership and present the DPRK with a real "bold initiative" of meaningful inducements for genuine change and cooperation and serious threats of negative consequences for continuous mischief. We can put a variation of Secretary Perry's original offer on the table, which can be dubbed the "Bush process," and see where it will lead us. At the very least, the Bush administration will be able to say to the American people and the other governments concerned that it genuinely tried to reach out and find a compromise solution with its sworn enemy, before risking an accidental or intentional military confrontation with the North. Unless, of course, it prefers the Reagan solution to the North Korean nuclear puzzle and is willing to risk an accidental outbreak of hostilities in Korea...

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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