Policy Forum 07-069: North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons: Dismantlement or Disarmament

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 07-069: North Korea’s Nuclear Weapons: Dismantlement or Disarmament", NAPSNet Policy Forum, September 13, 2007, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/north-kor-as-nuclear-weapons-dismantlement-or-disarmament/

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Policy Forum Online 07-069A: September 13th, 2007
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By Ruediger Frank

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I. Introduction

Ruediger Frank, Professor of East Asian Economy and Society at the University of Vienna, Executive Vice Speaker of the Vienna School of Governance and an Adjunct Professor at Korea University in

Seoul, writes, "it is unlikely that the weapons themselves will be scrapped. Nevertheless, stopping their production is a valuable thing and within reach. The reasons behind are, as usual, subject to speculation, and might include a fear of China, a concern over South Korean domestic developments, hunger for economic support and tactical gameplay."

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II. Article by Ruediger Frank

- "North Korea's Nuclear Weapons: Dismantlement or Disarmament"
By Ruediger Frank

On September 2nd, media started reporting about an agreement reached between the United States and North Korea on the future of the latter's much disputed nuclear program. Although the wording of the announcements was quite clear, the interpretations seemed to differ.

The sincerity of the offer notwithstanding, the North Korean side agreed to dismantle the program, i.e. the production facilities, for the generation of weapons-grade nuclear material. In the West, this was often misinterpreted as a step towards giving up the products themselves, i.e., nuclear bombs, warheads, or devices.

While the former is indeed within the scope of available options of the North Korean leadership, the latter clearly is not. Given both the track record of the decades since the end of the Korean War in 1953 and official propaganda, the North Korean nuclear program seems not to be designed to create inputs for an aggressive expansionist strategy but rather to provide a reliable means of deterrence. Domestically, too, what counts is the ability of the Kim Jong-il leadership to dramatically demonstrate to his people the capability of producing these weapons and their actual possession, and not the relatively unspectacular continued existence of related production facilities.

Stopping the production of weapons that have a diminishing marginal utility as a tool of deterrence is one thing; it can be explained at home as a gesture of might, strength and superiority and abroad as a sign of peacefulness and goodwill. Destroying these weapons, on the other hand, would look like surrendering to the enemy and be equivalent to political suicide. It is extremely unlikely that under the present conditions, Kim Jong-il would even think about such an option.

Still the question remains why he is ready to make the limited concession of freezing or dismantling the nuclear program. Although not an end to nuclear North Korea, this nevertheless is an important and laudable step towards improving security in the region. So what is in for Kim Jong-il?

Various interpretations are possible. North Korea is surely concerned because of China's rising influence through economic and soft power. The classical strategy against such an imbalance would be to look for a counter-weight, so strengthening the position of the USA in the region by offering a diplomatic success after the frustration of the last few years could be a deliberate choice of Pyongyang's policy makers. Such a game is not free of risks, but North Korea has played it successfully before.

An obvious explanation is the North Korean fear of a conservative victory in South Korea's presidential elections this December. By wooing Washington, Pyongyang follows the principle of what was coined Ostpolitik by Willy Brand or Northern Policy by Roh Tae-woo. If the United States would change their attitude towards North Korea from confrontation to even careful cooperation,

conservatives in Seoul would have a hard time attacking Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Dae-jung for having followed such a policy in the last years.

Finally, this is North Korea, and experience tells us that tomorrow things can look completely different. In other words, we might see just another tactical maneuver to buy time, to confuse the enemy, to extract some more aid and assistance, and then start the whole discussion over again.

To conclude, it is unlikely that the weapons themselves will be scrapped. Nevertheless, stopping their production is a valuable thing and within reach. The reasons behind are, as usual, subject to speculation, and might include a fear of China, a concern over South Korean domestic developments, hunger for economic support and tactical gameplay.

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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