# Policy Forum 05-63A: Rising Stakes in North Korea

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## Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 05-63A: Rising Stakes in North Korea", NAPSNet Policy Forum, August 02, 2005, https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/rising-stakes-in-north-korea/

# Rising Stakes in North Korea

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Policy Forum Online 05-63A: August 2nd, 2005

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By Mitchell B. Reiss

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### I. Introduction

Mitchell B. Reiss, Vice Provost for International Affairs at the College of William & Mary and former Director of Policy Planning at the State Department from July 2003 to February 2005, wrote: "[the] multilateral approach has helped bring North Korea back to Beijing, but Washington must now reassert its leadership and help shape a safer future for Northeast Asia."

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**II. Essay by Mitchell B. Reiss**

- Rising Stakes in North Korea
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This week after thirteen months North Korea returns to the negotiating table in Beijing for another round of talks about a possible end to its nuclear weapons program. The challenge for the United States and the other parties to the negotiations, China, South Korea, Japan and Russia, is to seize this moment and transform a loose consensus into tangible steps to rid the Korean peninsula of nuclear weapons.

There are some grounds for cautious optimism. In the past few months, the North's supreme leader, Kim Jong-il, has suggested some flexibility on the nuclear issue, linking his prestige to progress in Beijing. In addition, in meetings with senior Chinese and South Korean officials, he has tried to wrap his country's denuclearization in the mantle of his father's legitimacy and legacy. And in a gesture to the United States, North Korean propaganda organs downplayed the June 25 anniversary of the Korean war, a traditional occasion for strident anti-Americanism.

For its part, the second Bush Administration has also adopted a more disciplined and diplomatically astute approach. It has repeatedly referred to the North Korean leader as "Mr. Kim" rather than more pejorative labels, and acknowledged the North's sovereignty. It has also offered 50,000 tons of much-needed food assistance.

Still, the obstacles to a nuclear deal remain formidable. North Korea has still refused to acknowledge that it has secretly acquired uranium enrichment technology, the elimination of which is an essential element of any comprehensive solution. Pyongyang must also give a complete accounting of its plutonium, which can also be used for nuclear bombs. And then there are the verification measures that would have to be implemented to ensure that Pyongyang was abiding by any deal it signed. Given the secretive nature of the regime and its past history of cheating on its agreements, any inspection regime would need to be highly intrusive.

North Korea has made clear that it has some needs, too. It would like greater reassurance that the United States does not harbor "hostile intent" against it, code words for regime change. It would welcome greater financial assistance and infrastructure support to help its moribund economy. And it would like eventually to normalize diplomatic relations with the United States and its neighbors, Japan and South Korea.

These issues are far too complex to be worked out in only a few days of talks in Beijing. Indeed, past negotiating rounds have largely been set-piece recitations of formal talking points, not the patient give-and-take needed to explore whether agreement is possible.

If a break-through this week in Beijing is more than the traffic can bear, it is possible for the parties to make progress. A start would be to recognize that the North's ongoing nuclear weapons activities need to be halted before they can be reversed. One way this could be accomplished would be for the North to declare an immediate cessation of all of its nuclear weapons programs, which would cover both uranium enrichment and plutonium. The North would also declare its willingness in principle to dismantle its entire nuclear program in the future and reiterate its commitment to a full denuclearized Korean peninsula.

The other parties to the talks would, in return, offer security assurances to Pyongyang conditioned on the North's continuing to halt its nuclear programs and meet with the other parties. (To prevent North Korea from dragging out the talks while it increased its nuclear weapons capabilities, the assurances could also be time limited.) The parties would also pledge a willingness in principle to establish normal economic and diplomatic relations with a non-nuclear North Korea in the future.

Further, North Korea would commit to participating in lower-level working groups where the United States and others could probe its intentions. South Korea recently proposed that nuclear, political and economic issues be handled in this manner.

The shortcomings of this approach are obvious. The North's promises would not be worth the paper they were written on. Given the limits on our intelligence capabilities in the North, and the absence of any international inspectors on the ground, we would not have absolute confidence that North Korea was living up to its side of the deal. And this approach would not address, at least in the short-term, the North's long-range ballistic missiles and its appalling human rights record.

Yet an official declaration by Pyongyang of an immediate halt and of the ultimate dismantlement of its nuclear weapons program would be a significant diplomatic accomplishment. It would formalize commitments to the other parties, especially China and South Korea that would be harder to retract or violate in the future. Most importantly, it would provide a conceptual basis on which more tangible results could be constructed.

Three years into this latest crisis with North Korea, it is important to note that the United States does not own many of the high cards in this poker game. Although all options are on the table, the use of military force against North Korea is very unattractive. China and South Korea are reluctant to use their economic leverage to squeeze the North or proceed to sanctions in the United Nations. No one in the region favors reunification anytime soon; as the old joke goes, they like Korea so much they prefer that there are two of them. And Kim Jong-il has shown a ruthlessness to do whatever it takes to maintain his grip on power.

The first Bush Administration, preoccupied with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, attempted to invest North Korea's neighbors with greater responsibility for ending Pyongyang's nuclear ambitions. This multilateral approach has helped bring North Korea back to Beijing, but Washington must now reassert its leadership and help shape a safer future for Northeast Asia.

### 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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