



Policy Forum 07-012: U.N. Sanctions on North Korea and U.S. Korea Relations



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Article by Young Whan Kihl

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I. Introduction

Young Whan Kihl, Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Iowa State University, Ames, writes, "The Roh Moo-hyun government 'Peace and Prosperity Policy' was aimed at the Northeast Asian region as a whole, but it rested on the premise that the North Korean nuclear issue will be resolved peacefully. Roh's vision of making his country an economic hub, together with playing a 'balancer role' in regional dynamics, will go nowhere if North Korea continues to refuse to abandon its nuclear

program."

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. Article by Young Whan Kihl

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by Young Whan Kihl

I once read a quotation from a great man: "Know who you are, where you come from, and what directions you are headed to tomorrow." It is in this spirit of searching for an identity --both collective and individual-- that I discuss here my personal reflections on "where and how" Korea fits today in the big picture of changing U.S.- Korea relations.

When North Korea defied world opinion by going ahead with the missile test launching and the nuclear testing in 2006, it took a huge gamble on its nuclear brinkmanship. The day after the test the world was a very different place with heightened security surrounding the Korean peninsula. Instead of the North acquiring "nuclear deterrence" as it has professed, it gained greater insecurity and increased poverty. Twenty-three million North Koreans will suffer from a life of continued hardship and starvation.

Northeast Asia faces a very different world. Japan's projected rearmament will, in turn, cause China to boost its own defenses. South Korea is becoming increasingly vulnerable and naked before a nuclear-armed North Korea. Seoul has undermined the mutual confidence it once shared with the U.S. as a key ally to provide nuclear umbrella and protection. Far from preserving the regime, Pyongyang's nuclear test may end up as an act of regime suicide. South Korea must make sure that North Korea will not drag it along as a partner in its demise.

The ROK-U.S. alliance is a subset of a longer history of United States Korea relations dating back to the signing of the Treaty of Amity, Navigation and Commerce in 1882. The key to the success of an alliance is "shared interests" and "willingness to share defense burdens." Alliances can be bilateral or multilateral (like NATO) and need not be between the equals. The US-ROK alliance, like the US-Japan alliance, is one between un-equals and, as such, it falls upon the senior partner, the U.S. to provide asymmetric security like a "nuclear umbrella" as happened during the Cold War era.

For North Korea, possession of nuclear weapons offers three interrelated benefits: deterrence, offensive military capability, and political clout. First, Pyongyang believes that the ability to deliver nuclear payloads against South Korea, Japan and maybe eventually the U.S., will deter a U.S. attack on the North. Second, nuclear weapons give North Korea an offensive military capability. Third, Kim Jong Il's regime is legitimated by his nuclear weapons. The regime's domestic propaganda has convinced North Koreans that they have suffered in order to defend their country from American attack. For these reasons, Kim Jong Il is unlikely to give up these weapons.

A nuclear-armed North Korea will have the biggest impact on South Korea. If North Korean nuclear weapons were to be used, South Korea would be the primary victim. A nuclear North Korea renders South Korea's program of "independent" defenses meaningless. Seoul would have to reformulate its overall security strategy, whether through strengthening its alliance with the United States, considering its own nuclear option, or seeking a third way, as yet indiscernible.

Nuclear weapons also translate into political clout for Pyongyang. Through blackmail and

brinkmanship, the North can use its nuclear capabilities to gain political advantage and economic aid. These capabilities are a way for North Korea to ensure its regime survival and to enhance its leverage vis-à-vis other countries. Pyongyang's possession of nuclear weapons may also discourage domestic and foreign investments in South Korea, leading to serious economic difficulties.

The Roh Moo-hyun government "Peace and Prosperity Policy" was aimed at the Northeast Asian region as a whole, but it rested on the premise that the North Korean nuclear issue will be resolved peacefully. Roh's vision of making his country an economic hub, together with playing a "balancer role" in regional dynamics, will go nowhere if North Korea continues to refuse to abandon its nuclear program.

Under this circumstance South Korea and other regional powers must develop a more realistic North Korea policy. The new reality of a "nuclear" North Korea will entice the other regional powers like Japan and South Korea, as well as Taiwan and Australia, to either develop their own nuclear capabilities or obtain the shield of U.S. nuclear umbrella.

In this context, what will Kim Jong Il opt to do next? The answer to this question will make a huge difference to eventual outcomes of regional and global security. Surprisingly, North Korea's Foreign Ministry said on January 17, 2007 that its nuclear negotiator Kim Kye-Kwan had held a direct talk with U.S. Chief Negotiator Christopher Hill in Berlin "in a positive and sincere atmosphere and a certain agreement was reached there."

Why does a "nuclear" North Korea now desire to resume its diplomacy in the Six-Party Talks? It's motives cannot easily be fathomed. Hopefully, this is a good omen to mark the beginning of a negotiated settlement to Kim Jong Il's nuclear ambition. Potentially, the Six Party Talks slated to reconvene in mid-February in Beijing will provide a turning point leading to enhanced peace and stability in 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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