


US-North Korean Brinkmanship: Relevance To The Middle East?

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Recommended Citation

Emily Landau, "US-North Korean Brinkmanship: Relevance To The Middle East?", NAPSNet Policy Forum, January 23, 2003, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/us-north-korean-brinkmanship-relevance-to-the-middle-east/>

PFO 03-5A: January 23, 2003

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By Emily Landau

I. Introduction

II. Essay by Emily Landau

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Emily Landau is director of the Arms Control Regional and Security project at JCSS. In her essay below, Landau argues that the current nuclear stand-off between North Korea and the United States is an exercise in brinkmanship. More importantly, if the US ultimately adopts policies that reflect a lack of confidence in the present global arms control and non-proliferation regime, and relies more heavily on coercive or offensive measures, this will significantly affect how threats are viewed and dealt with throughout the Middle East.

This essay was originally published for Tel Aviv Notes by the [Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies](#) at Tel Aviv University.

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II. Essay by Emily Landau

"US-North Korean Brinkmanship: Relevance To The Middle East?"

By Emily Landau

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The current crisis between the US and North Korea over North Korea's recently declared nuclear activity began in early October 2002. US Assistant Secretary of State James A. Kelly confronted his North Korean counterparts with US intelligence suggesting that North Korea had been pursuing a uranium-enrichment program in violation of the 1994 agreement reached between the two countries. According to the terms of the 1994 agreement, North Korea would discontinue all nuclear weapons development programs in return for heavy-fuel oil and two light-water reactors. The agreement also called for the US and North Korea to move toward improving relations. After initially denying the US allegations in October, North Korea acknowledged the renewed nuclear weapons program the following day and announced the termination of the 1994 agreement. In December, the US suspended fuel oil shipments to North Korea. Various diplomatic efforts to defuse the growing tensions, with the participation of North Korea's regional neighbors who prefer to deal with the situation by diplomatic means, have so far not resolved the crisis.

If North Korea remains defiant and continues on its course of nuclear weapons development, estimates are that it will be able to produce (through a restart of its plutonium production program at Yongbyon) a number of nuclear weapons within six months. North Korea's track record of ballistic missile sales (contrary to international arms control norms), as well as its dire economic situation, raise the potential danger of nuclear weapons sales to additional states. In these terms, the crisis could enhance access of Middle Eastern states to nuclear technology, materials, and even ready-made nuclear devices - a tangible threat.

But there are clear signs that this episode is most significantly an exercise in brinkmanship between North Korea and the US. North Korea is attempting to play the nuclear card in its effort to alter US positions and attitudes toward it, as it did in 1994. Its agenda seems to focus on demands for diplomatic acceptance and guarantees of security. North Korea's position over the last months has been characterized by a number of twists and turns. It initially denied nuclear weapons activity and then admitted to it; it recently announced its intention to withdraw from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and then indicated willingness to consider reentry. Moreover, according to a recent commentary in a prominent state newspaper, North Korea is now claiming that its supposed admission of nuclear weapons development is a US fabrication. North Korea has at times added a measure of force to its position, threatening a harsh response if the US dared attack its nuclear facilities.

For its part, the US faces its own dilemmas in attempting to carve out a strategy for dealing with the North Korean challenge. Most immediately, it must consider the position it has taken on Iraq and whether it has the means to confront two states militarily at the same time. It must also take into consideration the specific regional conditions, especially the potential danger to South Korea, and the desire of neighboring states to reach a peaceful compromise. However, US considerations in this regard also reflect a more general confusion over how to deal with the newly perceived non-conventional threats that it believes it faces from Iran, Iraq and North Korea. The US Administration is struggling to find its way among newly articulated tendencies: a growing sense of disappointment in the arms control regime due to its limited effectiveness; skepticism about deterrence as regards "axis of evil" states; a desire to strengthen its own national defenses; and the impulse to rely more heavily on pre-emptive measures when possible.

How these dilemmas are perceived and dealt with has implications for the Middle East on several levels. The crisis is likely to underscore the case for pre-emptive action against Iraq so that it does not acquire the leverage of North Korea. But if the US adopts policies that reflect a lack of confidence in the long-term value of the norms embedded in the global arms control and non-proliferation regime and a greater reliance, instead, on coercive or offensive measures, this will affect how threats are viewed and dealt with throughout the Middle East. Finally, how the US deals with North Korea - an adversary that is itself in violation of the arms control regime and is on the verge of crossing (if not already past) the nuclear threshold - will be watched closely by Middle Eastern states. They will be interested to see how much such a state can stand up to the US and how deterrence and diplomacy will play themselves out.

Over the past decade, commentaries in the Arab media have repeatedly argued that the US follows a double standard in the nuclear realm. The common complaint has been that what is allowed to Israel is denied to the Arab states. But in the past few months, the public debate in the Arab media has undergone an interesting evolution. The initial impulse was to continue this same line of argument but to substitute North Korea for Israel and focus on Iraq as the exemplification of the Arab case. The basic argument was that the US persisted in its double standard by relying on diplomacy in the case of North Korea, even though this state is a clear nuclear proliferator, while pursuing a war option against Iraq, even though it has denied possession of WMD and has agreed to international inspections. However, there are also indications of a realization that the two equations are actually quite different, and that North Korea might in fact be an example to the Arab states. The lesson sometimes drawn is not that Arab states have a right to redress the lack of balance in the Middle East due to the US adoption of an unjustified double standard, but rather that nuclear weapons may have real strategic value beyond the Arab-Israeli context. They may be a means to deter US attempts to interfere in their affairs, or to compel the US to change certain positions. How prevalent this view becomes will be influenced by the way the US-North Korean crisis is finally played out.

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