

A New Approach to Counter Nuclear Proliferation on the Korean Peninsula

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Abstract

Attempts to reach and implement an agreement with North Korea to eliminate its nuclear program so far have failed. Efforts continue, but Pyongyang grew increasingly confrontational during early 2009. Prospects appear to be growing that the North will move ahead with an expanding nuclear arsenal. Should diplomacy fail, options to deter the Democratic People's Republic of Korea from continuing on its nuclear course are limited. War would be a disaster for all countries in the region. Tighter sanctions are unlikely to work without China's effective cooperation. So far, Beijing fears a North Korea facing economic collapse more than a North Korea with nuclear weapons. To encourage the People's Republic of China to take a more active role, the U.S. should indicate that the nightmare of a nuclear DPRK would be shared by all countries in the region, including China. In particular, Washington should state that while it remains committed to nonproliferation, it would be uneasy with the North possessing a nuclear monopoly among smaller powers in Northeast Asia and therefore would not oppose decisions by South Korea and Japan to respond with their own nuclear weapons programs. While viewing such proliferation as undesirable, the U.S. would be even more concerned about Pyongyang possessing a nuclear advantage over its neighbors. However, Washington's goal remains that of nonproliferation, so the U.S. hopes to continue working with Beijing to ensure that the Korean peninsula remains nuclear weapons-free. Washington would encourage the PRC to redouble its efforts to convince the North to adopt a policy of cooperation rather than confrontation. If the U.S. and China were able to successfully work together to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue, it would create a model for future cooperation in confronting future economic and geopolitical challenges.

Key Words: Bush administration, Agreed Framework, nuclear program, proliferation, Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, North Korea, China, Kim Jong-il, Six-Party Talks, sanctions, nuclear monopoly, arms race, regional stability.

Introduction

The Bush administration targeted the so-called Axis of Evil, but its strategy to prevent proliferation proved unsuccessful. Iraq turned out to lack an atomic weapons program. In contrast, Iran appears to be moving forward to develop nuclear weapons, only pausing periodically to negotiate with the European Union. Despite sporadically issuing threats against Tehran, the Bush administration proved to be largely impotent, staying in the background. The Obama administration hopes negotiation and engagement will generate better results, but the odds appear to be long.

North Korea, too, seems to be accelerating its movement down the nuclear path despite Washington's opposition. The Bush administration's policy first was to ignore the North and hope the problem would disappear. Then Washington pursued the six-party talks, leading to a brief moment when it appeared that the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was prepared to abandon its program. But the process came to an acrimonious halt last fall. More recently, Pyongyang has resumed nuclear and missile testing and has intensified its provocative, confrontational course.

The DPRK might never have been serious, though Washington has contributed to the break down with its refusal to engage in bilateral talks, persistent threats of military action, and its tendency to change deals unilaterally.² While the North's latest actions don't prevent a negotiated settlement, the prospect of successful diplomacy is not bright.

Some analysts appear to hope for a miracle. A few years ago author Bruce Gilley offered what he termed an "immodest proposal" to resolve the issue: "Beijing should invade North Korea on humanitarian grounds and establish a China-backed transitional regime there. The U.S. and its allies in Asia should provide diplomatic and logistical support to the operation, while the U.N. should provide its legal blessing." The operation, Gilley proclaimed, "could be a clean-cut affair."³ Of course, it would have been more realistic for Gilley to hope for an invasion from Mars.

The U.S. should engage the DPRK rather than expecting a miracle. Washington should continue working with other nations in the region, especially China and South Korea, in an attempt to ensure a nuclear-free Korean peninsula, while recognizing that the effort might not succeed. As part of that process, the U.S. should brandish the prospect of further proliferation, possibly reaching South Korea, Japan, and even Taiwan, as an inducement for North Korea to deal and, more importantly, for China to press Pyongyang to deal.

The Genesis of a Nuclear Crisis

The North Korean nuclear energy program began in the 1950s, though the prospect of a nuclear weapons program did not become clearly apparent until 1992. The first nuclear crisis was temporarily defused in 1994 with the Agreed Framework, which froze the DPRK's nuclear activities in exchange for shipments of heavy oil and construction of two light water nuclear reactors.⁴

With the election of George W. Bush in 2000, U.S.-North Korean relations took a dramatic turn for the worse. The president publicly reversed Secretary of State Colin Powell's intention to pick up where the previous administration had left off. President Bush very publicly disagreed with ROK President Kim Dae-jung during their March 2001 summit over the latter's "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with the North. Washington and Pyongyang were unable even to agree to an agenda for talks. In January 2002 Bush termed the North a member of the "axis of evil."

In October 2002 Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly visited North Korea, charging Pyongyang with having instituted a highly enriched uranium (HEU) program, a violation of the spirit if not the letter of the Agreed Framework. (Kelly said that DPRK officials acknowledged the existence of the program, but the North subsequently disclaimed any HEU production.) Donald Gregg, chairman of the Korea Society, and Don Oberdorfer, formerly a *Washington Post* correspondent, reported that Kim Jong-il made a written offer through them in November 2002 to "resolve the nuclear issue in compliance with the demands of a new century," but the Bush administration failed to respond.⁵ A confrontational spiral rapidly developed.⁶

In November 2002 the U.S. successfully pressed Japan and South Korea to suspend oil shipments under the Agreed Framework. The Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) later suspended reactor construction as well. Pyongyang restarted its small reactor, resumed construction of the larger two facilities, eliminated inspectors of and seals placed by the International Atomic Energy Agency and, on January 10, 2003, announced its withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. The IAEA referred the case to the UN Security Council, while military preemption was discussed as an option in the U.S.

The DPRK began to reprocess the 8000 spent nuclear fuel rods, from which an estimated four to six nuclear weapons could be created, a step Larry Nicksch of the Congressional Research Service called "the most dangerous North Korean move."⁷ The sporadic six-party talks, with the U.S., DPRK, People's Republic of China, South Korea, Japan, and Russia, lurched forward uncertainly before yielding a denuclearization

accord in November 2007. But that plan fell apart last year in a disagreement over verification procedures for North Korea's account of its nuclear activities. Although it is tempting to blame only Pyongyang, the U.S. also moved the goal-posts, so to speak.⁸ By spring 2009 the North had undertaken another nuclear test and North Korean officials stated that they intended to continue their nuclear weapons program and refuse to return to the six-party talks.

Assessing Pyongyang's intentions is well-nigh impossible, though in early 2009 succession issues loomed large as a result of Kim Jong-il's ill health. Some mixture of deceit and paranoia also likely played a role. Finally, reported the Council of Foreign Relations: "the apparent timing of key events also makes it possible that the speed at which the North pursued its HEU program, as well as Pyongyang's changing negotiating position since October 2002, may be partly explained by its increasing fear of the United States," fear exacerbated by the Bush administration's mistakes.⁹

As a result, the DPRK is rapidly moving towards becoming a nuclear state. What seemed to be a nascent program with the mere possibility of a bomb or two that was frozen and under international view has become a far bigger and more serious threat, with active plutonium reprocessing, nuclear testing, possible weapons production—and no international oversight.

Development of a North Korean atomic arsenal would have dramatic and damaging consequences in Northeast Asia. A negotiated settlement through both multilateral and bilateral talks obviously is the best solution. Pyongyang's willingness to deal seems to be steadily declining, but its desire for security and prestige always threatened to out-weigh economic considerations. Increased military influence as the North enters an uncertain leadership transition makes diplomatic accommodation less likely as well. Thus, the North may well move forward irrespective of any offer made by the U.S. and other states.

Then Washington would have to acquiesce or employ coercion. But economic sanctions could not work without Chinese and South Korean support, and might not work even then. After all, Pyongyang moved little even as a half million or more North Koreans were starving to death. Military action might not reach all of the North's nuclear sites, could spread radioactive fall-out throughout the region, and likely would trigger a war, one that would be far more costly than Iraq. Should talks fail, there will be no good options.

Achieving Regional Cooperation

Washington cannot dictate policy in the region. Even South Korea no longer is willing to play a compliant U.S. client. After two left-wing

administrations, the current government reflects a popular shift towards tougher and more conservative attitudes. However, since the Cold War has ended opinions have shifted sharply against America and, given the ongoing change in generational leadership, seem unlikely to be reversed. Noted David Kang of Dartmouth College, the ROK "is moving in the direction of diminished United States influence."¹⁰ Indicative of the major differences between the two countries was the declaration of Chung Dong-young, unification minister in the Roh government, that the North had a "basic right" to civilian nuclear power.¹¹

Although popular antagonism towards Pyongyang has risen in the midst of continuing DPRK provocations, even conservatives in South Korea want to avoid a military confrontation. Moreover, while Seoul has cut back aid as bilateral relations with the North have deteriorated, South Korean officials still would be hesitant to back potentially nation-breaking sanctions. They watched German reunification with barely disguised horror, realizing the tremendous cost that would fall on the ROK from a similar process on the peninsula.

Washington's diminished influence is evident outside of the ROK as well. America, Kang added, "is no longer the unquestioned leader in Northeast."¹² Most importantly, none of the DPRK's neighbors are eager to destabilize the North. Kang observed that most East Asian nations "believe that North Korea can be deterred, and instead are worried about the economic and political consequences of a collapsed regime."¹³ Without doubt, the process could be chaotic and bloody, and Robert Kaplan has argued that the North already is mid-way through a process of collapse.¹⁴

The PRC shares many of the ROK's concerns about instability in the Korean peninsula, particular an increased flow of refugees into China's border provinces, heavily populated by ethnic Koreans. No doubt Beijing also would prefer not to have a united Korea allied with America and garrisoned by U.S. troops on its border. Xu Wenji of Jilin University in Changchun, China, noted that while America was far away, "this is our neighbor and any disturbance on the Korean Peninsula has a profound effect on China."¹⁵

Moreover, the prospect of a North Korean bomb by itself gives Beijing little reason for concern, while the continued controversy provides it with leverage in dealing with the U.S. As Harvard physicist Hui Zhang has explained, Beijing "believes the nuclear crisis is mainly the business of Washington and Pyongyang."¹⁶ As a result, Chinese officials, including those in the military, often have said that they will not allow North Korea to collapse.¹⁷

In fact, the PRC tends to respond to North Korean provocations with sharp language, before lapsing into calls for calm and restraint. The pattern repeated itself after Pyongyang's missile tests and nuclear test in mid-2009.¹⁸

Antagonism in Japan over North Korea's past kidnapping of Japanese citizens has generated greater popular support for imposing sanctions. Pyongyang's missile and nuclear tests have further hardened opinion in Japan. However, fear of the consequences might cause Tokyo to step back from direct confrontation. Russia may have the least directly at stake, though instability or war on the peninsula obviously would be undesirable in its eyes. Moscow also has been improving its relations with the North of late.

Winning China's Assistance

Although Seoul's position is important, the PRC is the most important regional player. Assessing its actual influence in Pyongyang is difficult. Some China critics contend that Beijing is calling the shots and manipulating North Korea for its own purposes. However, the DPRK long has guarded its independence and the late Kim Il-sung systematically eradicated factions with links to both Beijing and the Soviet Union.

Most observers presume that the combination of its historic ties and large-scale shipments of fuel, food, and consumer goods provide China with leverage lacking in Washington. Yet Pyongyang has been ever-willing to balk at Chinese requests: North Korea has gone ahead with missile and nuclear tests despite public appeals by Beijing.

Still, the North might have no choice but to respond to economic penalties by its much larger neighbor. Although the PRC continues to soften UN Security Council resolutions and sanctions, Beijing did freeze North Korean bank accounts in response to a request by Washington (as part of an investigation in money laundering and counterfeiting), which generated a sharp response in Pyongyang (which made concessions to unfreeze its accounts). Tougher economic restrictions, with the possibility of virtually shutting down the North Korean economy, might generate a bigger response.

If a negotiated settlement is possible, active Chinese involvement is a must. So how best to make Beijing willing to pay the price of pushing Pyongyang into a deal?

For years the Bush administration publicly urged the PRC to press the North. Undersecretary of State Nicholas Burns urged China to use its "influence and exert some pressure on North Korea."¹⁹ Christopher Hill, the Bush administration's special ambassador detailed to handle the Pyongyang and its nuclear program, said: "We need China to be very,

very firm with their neighbors and frankly with their long-term allies, the North Koreans, on what is acceptable behavior and what is not acceptable behavior."²⁰ In a barely disguised reference to the PRC, UN Ambassador John Bolton said: "countries that have leverage over North Korea . . . bear the responsibility for trying to use that to bring the North Koreans back into compliance."²¹

Some American officials have tried to use praise to push the Chinese forward, suggesting that delivering the DPRK, as it were, would demonstrate that they had become significant, and positive, contributors to the international system. Yale history professor Michael Auslin believes simply offering to follow the PRC's lead is enough: "Beijing has long desired a leading role in the region; now it can have it, and the responsibility for success as well."²²

Republican presidential contender Sen. John McCain (R-Ariz.) took a different tack in 2008, opining that Beijing's attitude should be a "defining issue in our relations with China" and that "There are many key areas that we are cooperating in that I believe would be affected, including trade, by China's failure to act."²³ More recently former Undersecretary of State Robert Joseph contended: "China must know that there are costs and risks for not acting to end the North's nuclear programs. Some of those costs we can impose if we are willing to pay an economic price."²⁴

Carrots or sticks might help, though the PRC is not likely to act against its perceived interest in either case and almost certainly would bridle at a public ultimatum which would leave compliance as an intolerable loss of prestige. A better approach would be to make it clear that China will share in the nightmare created by a nuclear North Korea.

Auslin contended that Chinese President "Hu Jintao certainly doesn't want a nuclear Pyongyang capable of targeting every Chinese city."²⁵ That seems a remote possibility, however, and Beijing is unlikely to much fear a DPRK attack. Much more credible would be the threat of proliferation to other nations.

If China has one fear from the impact of a DPRK bomb, it is that nuclear weapons would not stay in Pyongyang. (There is abundant evidence of Chinese displeasure with the North, since the PRC values regional stability and does not want to encourage U.S. coercion. But these sentiments might not be sufficient to cause Beijing to risk attempting to coerce a recalcitrant North.)

That is, no one in the region is likely to be comfortable with the DPRK's possessing a nuclear monopoly among smaller states. Thus, absent countervailing U.S. pressure, a North Korean nuclear arsenal would encourage the spread of nuclear weapons to South Korea and

Japan, and perhaps beyond, including Taiwan.²⁶ Even the most peace-minded state would be reluctant to sit atomically naked if such an unpredictable actor as North Korea developed a nuclear capability. One Chinese scholar noted that any nation would worry that "A regional nuclear arms race among existing nonnuclear neighbors could leave it surrounded."²⁷

However, the prospect of proliferation might seem unlikely since American policymakers traditionally oppose any spread of nuclear weapons. This is one reason why some U.S. analysts are so worried about the prospect of a North Korean nuclear bomb. Kurt Campbell, a Clinton administration Defense Department official now with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, explained: "The worry is that if North Korea tests a nuclear weapon, then it is difficult to put the genie back in the bottle and that it triggers a host of other countries to reconsider their own pledges not to pursue nuclear weapons." He added: "It could lead other countries like Japan, South Korea and Taiwan to go nuclear."²⁸

Nevertheless, a North Korean bomb would force the U.S. to reconsider its strategy. Should the North move ahead with its nuclear program, Washington would find itself with few options. Engagement and sanctions would have failed. Military action likely would ignite a disastrous war.

Although accepting, if not encouraging, proliferation would seem to be a dramatic reversal of U.S. policy, Washington already has begun to adjust its stance. While nonproliferation is desirable in principle, Washington has readily abandoned that general principle when convenient. For instance, America did little to discourage British, French, and Israeli acquisition of nuclear weapons. Today it ignores Israel's substantial arsenal while demanding that Iran forswear the nuclear option. The U.S. chose not to engage in a preemptive strike against Chinese and Russian nuclear facilities.

Moreover, Washington has come grudgingly to acknowledge that America's abstract preferences cannot overcome insecure regional dynamics, as, for example, that evident in South Asia. The Clinton administration imposed sanctions on both India and Pakistan for developing nukes, with no impact other than to anger both nations. In contrast, the Bush administration worked assiduously to improve relations with New Delhi and, indeed, negotiated an agreement which, in practice, accepted India's status as a nuclear power.

The deal was complicated and controversial, but won approval in both nations. The U.S. agreed to sell nuclear technology to India if the latter committed itself to inspections of its civilian facilities and fulfilled

some provisions of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, which it has not signed. Criticism was sharp. The agreement arguably undercut the principle of nonproliferation, and could encourage other states to demand special status, like India, as well as encourage other nuclear powers, such as China and Russia, to make special deals with favored states. Nations like the DPRK and Iran might choose to hang tough in hopes of eventually winning international acceptance of their weapons status. Finally, Independent Institute scholar Ivan Eland has worried that India itself might some day become a potent foe of America.²⁹

But other nations already have a powerful incentive to develop an atomic arsenal, including deterring Washington from acting against them. Observed analysts Ted Galen Carpenter and Charles V. Pena: "The most reliable deterrent--maybe the only reliable deterrent--is to have nuclear weapons."³⁰ They believe such a concern motivates both Iran and the DPRK. Kenneth Adelman, the former head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency has also contended that this is Pyongyang's main objective.³¹ (America's willingness to coerce smaller nations may have influenced India as well.³²)

India already was nuclear capable and likely to build a significant arsenal without Washington's acquiescence. The U.S.-India agreement had the significant virtue of recognizing nuclear reality while improving relations with what was becoming an increasingly important international player. Washington's new-found flexibility allowed it to rely on a larger set of tools to advance its ends, including, paradoxically, threatening proliferation in the hopes of curbing proliferation, in the case of the North's neighbors.

Using the Nuclear Stick

Thus, several observers have suggested that Washington brandish the "stick" of a regional nuclear arms race. For instance, foreign policy scholar Ted Galen Carpenter suggests informing the DPRK that if it acquires an atomic arsenal, "Washington will urge Tokyo and Seoul to make their own decisions about acquiring strategic deterrents."³³ Carpenter focused on North Korea: "The one chance of getting the North to abandon its current course is to make it clear that Pyongyang may have to deal with nuclear neighbors and would, therefore, not be able to intimidate them."³⁴

Other American opinion-leaders would adopt the same strategy, but aim it more at Beijing than the DPRK. Wrote conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer:

We should go to the Chinese and tell them plainly that if they do not join us in squeezing North Korea and thus stopping its march

to go nuclear, we will endorse any Japanese attempt to create a nuclear deterrent of its own. Even better, we would sympathetically regard any request by Japan to acquire American nuclear missiles as an immediate and interim deterrent. If our nightmare is a nuclear North Korea, China's is a nuclear Japan. It's time to share the nightmares.³⁵

Adam Garfinkle, then editor of *The National Interest*, took a similar stance. In his view a North Korean bomb would make Japanese nuclear armament almost axiomatic. Then the PRC would "have to choose between a nuclear North Korea and Japan (and maybe South Korea, too) on its doorstep, or joining with the U.S. and others to manage the containment" of the DPRK.³⁶ Kenneth Adelman made a similar proposal in a war game hosted by *The Atlantic*. Indeed, Adelman went further, pushing for a force reduction in South Korea, explaining: "I don't want the United States to take the traditional approach of reinforcing troops, adding nuclear weapons—all the things we've done over the last forty years. We need to give the region more responsibility."³⁷

Some analysts believe the remedy might be effective but still too costly. Bobby Earle of the conservative GOPUSA remained concerned about proliferation: "Building up nuclear arsenals in the region might lessen North Korea's ability to threaten or bully its neighbors with nuclear weapons, but it does nothing to address the nuclear proliferation issue."³⁸ Indeed, the chief danger of a North Korean bomb to America would be the prospect of transfers to non-state actors, something which should be treated as a *casus belli*. It is a good reason to work overtime to dissuade the North from building a bomb, but the obvious problem is finding a means of dissuading Pyongyang.

A different worry was expressed by Robert Kagan and William Kristol, who argued that the prospect of Japan and Taiwan's creating nuclear weapons could spur "an East Asian nuclear arms race" and "should send chills up the spine of any sensible American strategist."³⁹ However, the U.S. and others have far more to fear from nuclear weapons in the hands of authoritarian or totalitarian states than in the hands of responsible democratic allies. If a North Korea bomb becomes a foregone conclusion, then Washington will have to compare two ugly futures: North Korea alone with nuclear weapons versus North Korea with nuclear weapons facing America's allies with nuclear weapons.

In the former case, the U.S. will be expected to maintain a nuclear umbrella over Japan and South Korea, enmeshing Washington in a region that has grown far more dangerous. Small regional controversies will threaten to become major global crises. American policymakers will

have to be prepared to risk Los Angeles and San Francisco for Seoul and Tokyo. The risk will be small, but the potential costs will be catastrophic.

A second best solution would be to leave allied states whose interests will not always coincide with those of America with their own deterrent capabilities. Such a policy would have the secondary advantage of deterring Chinese adventurism. Beijing has pledged a “peaceful rise,” but would be encouraged to follow such a strategy if its neighbors were capable of imposing a high price for aggressive behavior.

The advantages of this strategy would go further, however. The mere threat of extended proliferation could preclude the initial problem of a North Korean atomic capability. If Pyongyang decides to develop an atomic bomb, it will be because Kim Jong-il believes that his nation or his political dynasty, or both, will be more secure as a result. (A nuclear capability presumably would allow the North to deter any military attack, force surrounding states to treat it with respect, and encourage nations and international organizations to offer additional economic aid for nonthreatening behavior.)

But if the DPRK realized that it would not possess a nuclear monopoly among smaller states--that it would remain the poorest nation in the region with the smallest arsenal--it would have less incentive to join the nuclear club. The North's sensitivity to perceived nuclear threats against its own security is evidenced by its demand in 2004 that the Washington eliminate its nuclear umbrella for the South. The next year North Korea's chief nuclear negotiator, Kim Gye-gwan, said his nation would give up its weapons program if America ended its nuclear threat to the DPRK.⁴⁰ It's hard to credit anything said by any North Korean official, but it is possible that a credible warning that South Korea and Japan are likely to follow the North might, thereby reducing the utility of its arsenal, encourage Pyongyang to be more willing to accept a negotiated settlement, winning economic benefits rather than generating a security stalemate, thereby avoiding a crisis.

A North Korean Bomb Anyway?

Of course, the DPRK still might prefer to possess nuclear weapons, even if other powers matched it one, two, or three bombs for bomb (especially since Pyongyang may be hoping to deter the U.S. more than its neighbors.) Washington then could change its mind and allow its bluff to be called. American policymakers might decide that a multi-sided nuclear order in East Asia was too dangerous or that serial expansion in East Asia would destroy the global nonproliferation framework.

Or Washington might decide that, bad as proliferation would be, the U.S. nevertheless would be more secure if allied states were defending

themselves. Indeed, Washington today confronts North Korea only because the former is defending the ROK, with 26,000 troops on station. Were the U.S. not determined to micro-manage East Asian affairs, Pyongyang's attentions would be elsewhere. Thus, were America to draw back, it would not have to worry about risking Los Angeles for Seoul or Tokyo if the DPRK developed long-range nuclear missiles.

As suggested by Krauthammer, the U.S. could threaten to provide its nearby allies with a small nuclear inventory, sufficient to cancel the DPRK's advantage, as well as whatever anti-missile technology is available. This would be simple but controversial, turning Washington into the proliferator-in-chief.

Or the U.S. could simply drop its objection to the acquisition by its allies of a countervailing weapon. (In recent years some American officials have expressed the fear that friendly states might be tempted to proliferate in response to a North Korean bomb. Whether they have been speaking out of fear, as a warning, or both, is unclear).

American abandonment of its objection to proliferation might be enough to spur the ROK and Japan to move forward. In fact, in time both South Korea and Japan may decide that their national interests require nuclear weapons, irrespective of their present U.S. security guarantees, especially if they begin to doubt Washington's willingness to risk nuclear retaliation to defend distant allies which lie next door to other major, nuclear-armed powers. This will be particularly the case if tensions rise with China. In time Beijing is likely to possess a potent, if still limited, nuclear arsenal fully capable of deterring American intervention on behalf of the PRC's neighbors. Rather than trusting the willingness of U.S. officials to engage in self-immolation, other countries may decide the only option is to develop their own deterrents.

Still, developing nuclear weapons would be controversial in any nation. Both South Korea and Japan are capable of creating an atomic arsenal and have debated doing so. Taiwan, too, obviously has the necessary economic infrastructure to develop nuclear weapons. Its intentions are less obvious and its international situation is more complicated, but the spread of nuclear weapons in the region might affect the thinking in Taipei as well.

A South Korean Bomb?

Seoul possesses 19 nuclear plants and has the industrial, technological, and scientific assets necessary for a program. Peter Hayes of the University of Sydney has observed: "There is little doubt, however, that South Korea now has a near-nuclear option."⁴¹

The ROK actually began to develop nuclear weapons more than three decades ago under military dictator Park Chung-hee, who worried

about the North's nascent program. Only American pressure caused the South to cease its efforts. (Washington pressed South Korea to stop and such nations as Belgium, Canada, and France to drop their sales to Seoul of fuel fabrication facilities, heavy water reactors, and reprocessing systems.) The South's interest in a nuclear program at least in part reflected its fears about the reliability of America's defense guarantee in the aftermath of President Richard Nixon's withdrawal of an army division in 1970 and the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. There also have been unverified reports suggesting that the ROK came quite close to developing an atomic weapon at the beginning of the 1980s.⁴²

Some South Koreans have worried about the regional security environment, even absent a DPRK bomb. Fear of Seoul's vulnerability to North Korean artillery and missile attack probably has encouraged ROK officials to look for another military tool. Wrote Kim Taewoo of the Korean Institute of Defense Analyses: "Probably the most fundamental dilemma facing South Korea will be that it ends up without nuclear weapons anyway but with nuclear weapons in the hands of the surrounding states, outward-looking Chinese military modernization, and Japan's growing nuclear potential, not to mention the nuclear suspicion in North Korea."⁴³ During the summer of 1994 a best-selling book in the ROK argued that a united Korea would need nuclear weapons to counter China and Japan.

Not surprisingly, the crisis involving North Korea has caused some South Koreans to rethink their nation's policy. In 1994 Kim Tae-u, Director of the Peace Strategy Research Center, declared: "The time has come for us to end a nuclear policy that has abandoned the effort to help ourselves. We should not allow ourselves to stand uncovered against the winds from the United States and North Korea, which sway back and forth."⁴⁴

Similarly, commented a South Korean diplomat to Michael Moran of MSNBC: "Much of our thinking for the past two decades, and in Japan, too, I would say, has been based on the idea that we are under the U.S. nuclear umbrella." But, he worried, "If the U.S. cannot prevent North Korea from testing a nuclear weapon, how can it deter North Korea from using one? That's the basic questions being asked today."⁴⁵ A few years ago Assemblyman Park Jin voiced a similar sentiment: "If North Korea says it has nuclear weapons . . . why shouldn't we have the same?"⁴⁶

ROK Hedging

Indeed, Seoul may have long adopted a hedging strategy, despite formally renouncing any effort to develop an atomic arsenal. There is evidence that Seoul consciously maintained a "virtual nuclear capability," allowing it to better meet future exigencies.⁴⁷ Moreover,

2004 was highlighted by the dramatic revelation of laboratory experiments involving plutonium and uranium enrichment stretching back to 1982. The ROK government claimed that they were unauthorized and established new safeguards. Most important, Seoul went into a vigorous lobbying mode, especially in the U.S., to limit the international fall-out, to coin a phrase. The government-backed Korea Institute for National Unification published a monograph explaining: "Although the failure of reporting was observed as a matter of serious concern by the IAEA, the 2004 incident, in no way, should be interpreted as representing a desire by the ROK government to pursue a nuclear weapon development program."⁴⁸

The International Atomic Energy Agency praised the ROK for its cooperation, but criticized the Roh Moo-hyun government for being less than forthcoming. In its view, Seoul's explanations were not entirely satisfactory. Indeed, observed Edward Olsen of the Naval Postgraduate School, "ROK officials cautiously acknowledged the experiments could have more theoretical significant than originally ascribed to them."⁴⁹

Other observers were equally suspicious. A report from the Institute for Foreign Policy Analysis concluded: "It is possible that the experiments were simply the result of unsupervised scientists indulging their personal curiosity, but the fact that maintaining an intellectual capacity to develop a nuclear weapons program someday (should it be deemed necessary for national security) would not be inconsistent with the thinking of many South Korean policymakers."⁵⁰

Joseph Cirincione, director of the Non-Proliferation Project at the Carnegie Endowment for Peace, observed: "It is no surprise nations like South Korea are beginning to hedge their bets in light of the North Korean nuclear weapons advances."⁵¹ Analyst Ehsan Aharari pointed to three reasons "why South Korean scientists ventured into the forbidden territory of developing enriched uranium, which takes them so close to developing nuclear weapons."⁵²

(The experiments probably violated the 1992 nuclear agreement signed with North Korea, allowing Pyongyang to put the incident to good propaganda use. The latter accused the U.S. of applying a "double standard" to the two Koreas.⁵³ In return, Chris Hill, U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, argued that Pyongyang should follow the example of cooperation with the IAEA set by Seoul.⁵⁴)

Ongoing North Korean developments are occurring against a broader foreign policy backdrop that might encourage Seoul to seek a weapon. Noted analyst Yoel Sano: "Neither South Korea nor Japan is content to occupy forever the secondary roles they have been playing until now, auxiliary to the US. While Japan's leaders have long bemoaned Tokyo's

lack of global clout in relation to the size of its economy, South Korea is also becoming increasingly assertive. There has been a generational shift in both countries, which is also fostering new foreign policy visions."⁵⁵

The late President Roh Moo-hyun advocated that the ROK strengthen its "independent defense capabilities" and become a regional balancer.⁵⁶ He once seemed to rule out developing nuclear weapons, but in the context of assuming that "nuclear development will not be permitted in Korea--either North or South."⁵⁷ Although his successor, Lee Myung-bak, is a proponent of a strong alliance with America, the latter is taking a more uncompromising stance towards Pyongyang and could very well decide to pursue a more assertive regional strategy. In fact, there appears to be widespread South Korean support for taking on a more active international role.

After the North's latest weapons tests, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated: "I want to underscore the commitments the United States has and intends always to honor for the defense of South Korea and Japan."⁵⁸ Nevertheless, Seoul requested a defense guarantee in writing against a North Korea nuclear weapon.⁵⁹ Even if Washington agrees, paper guarantees might not be enough for a nervous ROK. After all, the South has no way to enforce such a promise on a future administration even if made with full sincerity today.

In fact, though the South Korean public tends to favor a more pacific course, there are indications that interest among policymakers in developing a nuclear capability is growing. Reports Jungmin Kang, a visiting scholar with the Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research: "Regardless of U.S. assurances, it seems some South Korean politicians are so fed up with North Korea's never-ending threats toward the South that they are having serious discussions about Seoul's 'nuclear sovereignty'."⁶⁰ Among those raising the issue are members of parliament.⁶¹

Indeed, a series of conspiratorial novels blaming the U.S. for pitting the two Koreas against each other and preventing them from collaborating on a joint nuclear weapon to respond to a Japanese atomic program ended up as best sellers in the ROK. Suspicion also has been voiced that some South Koreans are not terribly concerned about a North Korean bomb because Seoul would inherit it after reunification.

Japanese Nuclear Options

Japan's network of plutonium breeder reactors has led some observers to call Japan a "paranuclear" or "virtual nuclear" state. Tokyo has admitted that it has the ability to quickly create a nuclear arsenal if it desired. In fact, Japan could develop nuclear weapons within a year or even six months by some accounts. But as the only state to suffer a

nuclear attack, Japan has long officially rejected the possibility of building an atomic arsenal; indeed, Tokyo's pacifist constitution and popular attitudes have hindered development of a significant conventional military and deployment abroad of what conventional forces it currently possesses.

However, as Japan increasingly rethinks its international role, the development of nuclear weapons appears to be a more serious prospect. After China's nuclear test in October 1964, Prime Minister Eisaku Sato claimed that his nation was ready to develop such weapons if Washington did not extend its nuclear umbrella. Reports later surfaced of an internal study between 1967-1970 on nuclear options, which reached a negative conclusion. In 1994 Prime Minister Tsutomu Hata observed: "it's certainly the case that Japan has the capability to possess nuclear weapons but has not made them."⁶² His comments did more to unsettle than reassure Japan's neighbors.

The issue appeared to receive little public attention during the Cold War, but Japanese officials long talked, usually in whispers to one another, about preserving the option to develop nuclear weapons.⁶³ Years later it was revealed that an official report in 1969 contended that Tokyo should "keep the economic and technical potential for the production of nuclear weapons, while seeing to it that Japan will not be interfered with in this regard."⁶⁴

Japanese perceptions of a more hostile international climate seem to be causing more than a passing thought to reviving this option. The first nuclear crisis involving the DPRK caused Tokyo to informally raise the possibility of making nuclear weapons.⁶⁵ In 1995 Tokyo conducted an internal review of its nuclear options in the wake of the first North Korean nuclear crisis. Initiated by Socialist Party Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama, the report stated: "The discussion in favor of owning nuclear weapons lacks sufficient study into the negative impact, while the idea that not possessing nuclear weapons is detrimental is not sufficiently backed by military theory."⁶⁶ Nevertheless, in the intervening years it has become evident that some Japanese officials harbor latent nuclear ambitions.

For instance, in October 1999, parliamentary vice defense minister Shingo Nishimura resigned after proposing that Japan develop nuclear weapons. Three years later Liberal Party President (and later opposition leader) Ichiro Ozawa, who, as prime minister, had accepted Nishimura's resignation, observed that "China is applying itself to expansion of military power in the hope of becoming a superpower" and could get "too inflated" and its threats could frighten the Japanese people. In that event: "It would be so easy for us to produce nuclear warheads. We

have plutonium at nuclear power plants in Japan, enough to make several thousand such warheads." He added that he told a Chinese intelligence official "that if we get serious, we will never be beaten in terms of military power."⁶⁷ Under fire at home and abroad for his comments, Ozawa explained that he was not calling for development of nuclear weapons, which would not benefit Japan; rather, he claimed to hope to improve China-Japan relations.⁶⁸ His "explanation" was not entirely convincing. In April 2003 Ozawa again discussed Japan's nuclear option.

Even more significant were the comments of Chief Cabinet Secretary Yasuo Fukuda on May 31, 2002, indicating that Japan's peace constitution did not preclude acquisition of nuclear weapons. Events have "changed to the point that even revising the constitution is being talked about," he observed, and "depending upon the world situation, circumstances and public opinion could require Japan to possess nuclear weapons."⁶⁹ Shinzo Abe, a senior adviser to the prime minister, later said much the same thing about Japan's constitution. Another high-ranking government official, Yasuo Fukuda, observed that changing circumstances "could require Japan to possess nuclear weapons."⁷⁰ Abe went on to chair the Liberal Democratic Party and serve as prime minister.

Regional Fears

Terumasa Nakanishi and Kazuya Fukuda, both of the University of Kyoto, have argued: "the best way for Japan to avoid being the target of North Korean nuclear missiles is for the prime minister to declare without delay that Japan will arm itself with nuclear weapons."⁷¹ Similarly, Shingo Nishimura, an opposition member of parliament, has worried that Tokyo is doing nothing in the face of North Korean threats: "Japan should renounce its non-nuclear principles."⁷² Mataka Kamiya of the National Defense Academy argued that Japan's constitution, which nominally bars possession of any military, would allow possession of nuclear weapons "for strictly defensive purposes."⁷³

Relations among the two Koreas and Japan remain difficult because of Tokyo's brutal colonial rule in the first half of 20th century. While Tokyo has little to fear from the two Korean states (or even an aggressive united Korea) armed with conventional weapons, a Korean government with nuclear weapons might be seen as a very different kind of threat.

The DPRK's animus towards Japan is obvious and Pyongyang's program may be directed at least to some degree in that direction: "Japan is going against the trend in the world toward non-nuclearization and peace after the end of the Cold War and is actively stepping up its attempts to become a nuclear power," stated one official publication a decade ago.⁷⁴ Moreover, North Korea has regularly threatened Tokyo as

the former's relations with both America and Japan worsened in recent years. Pyongyang possesses the Scud-D, with a range of 1,100 kilometers, which could reach Japan. A nuclear-armed DPRK might eventually be able to marry an atomic warhead to its missiles. Indeed, the DPRK's July 2006 missile test set off a discussion of the desirability and constitutionality of preemptively knocking out a North Korean missile before it was launched. Opening such a debate would naturally bleed over into a discussion of nuclear weapons, especially if Pyongyang created a deliverable arsenal.

Japan's relations with the South are better, but not good. And South Korean officials, too, have raised concerns about Tokyo's nuclear stance. Although the ROK would be unlikely to strike Japan militarily, possession of nuclear weapons would empower Seoul in such disputes as possession of the Dokto/Takeshima Islands. Tokyo is extremely sensitive to the South's flirtation with atomic research as well as the DPRK's nuclear weapons program. Even the relatively minor controversy over the South Korean nuclear experiments caused Japan's cabinet Secretary Hiroyuk Hosoda to call the tests "inappropriate" and insist that the international community "must not allow this to lead to development of nuclear weapons." He called for strict inspections to enforce the NPT.⁷⁵

Fear of North Korea has joined concern over periodically more tense relations with the PRC. Bilateral problems are manifold, ranging from Japan's alleged lack of acceptance of responsibility for war-time atrocities to Tokyo's friendliness with Taiwan to China's increased influence throughout East and Southeast Asia. A sharp downturn in relations might spur an open, if sporadic, debate about the issue both in and out of Japan. In today's world Japanese may remember Ichiro Ozawa's comment: "Northeastern Asia, in which both China and North Korea are located, is the most unstable region in the world."⁷⁶

Overall, Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi pursued a more assertive foreign policy, taking tough stands towards both the PRC and North Korea. His government also sparred with South Korea over territorial claims and textbook lessons. All told, noted Liu Hua, a student at Beijing University, "the voice of boosting Japan's defense capabilities and gaining security autonomy from America is much louder than before."⁷⁷ Prime Minister Koizumi did much to press Japan forward to a more significant international role, and his successors, despite the current vagaries of Japanese politics, seem likely to move further over time.

Pushed to the Brink by the DPRK

Although the Koizumi government did not raise the nuclear option, North Korea's activities have pushed Tokyo towards greater international

involvement, such as the dispatch of peacekeeping forces to Iraq. In its subsequent security guidelines, Japan has taken the unprecedented step of calling Taiwan a security concern. Although Prime Minister Shinzo Abe used the anniversary of the nuclear bombing of Hiroshima to reaffirm Japan's non-nuclear course, his aides suggested that Tokyo study the possibility of developing nuclear weapons after the first North Korean nuclear test.

And now, worries journalist Richard Halloran, "mutterings of Japanese distrust of America's extended deterrence, as the nuclear umbrella is known, have coursed through a skeptical underground discussion." He quotes one Japanese scholar warning that "There are a lot of Gaullists in disguise in Japan."⁷⁸

There remain strong arguments against Japan's developing nuclear weapons, especially against Washington's wishes. Some of the strongest Japanese advocates of such a course have lost influence for other reasons, and Tokyo could face substantial pressure from abroad.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, outside circumstances likely would be the determining factor. And the round of missiles and nuclear tests in mid-2009 appeared to spur support for creating both an effective missile defense and a preemptive capacity against North Korean missiles. Moreover, according to Masako Toki at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation, opposition groups feared that North Korea's nuclear test "could strengthen the argument that Japan should pursue nuclear weapons."⁸⁰ Even U.S. Vice President Richard Cheney observed a few years ago: "Japan may be forced to consider whether or not they want to readdress the nuclear issues."⁸¹

Of course, there is little enthusiasm among Tokyo's neighbors for a Japanese bomb, especially the PRC. One Chinese analyst argued that such a step would encourage other countries "to follow in Japan's steps, ultimately reducing global, regional, and Japan's security."⁸² The common hope is that the U.S. government would prevent Tokyo from developing nuclear weapons. However, as noted earlier, North Korean atomic developments might change America's perspective. And it then might not require much encouragement from Washington to change policies in Seoul and Tokyo.

Asian analyst Yoel Sano wrote, "North Korea's nuclear-weapons program remains the main catalyst for any attempts by Seoul and Tokyo to go nuclear." That's not all, however. The changing international security environment could eventually invite a policy rethink in both nations in any case. Notes Sano: "Beyond the immediate threat of North Korea, both South Korea and particularly Japan are seeking a greater global role after decades of junior partnership with the United States."⁸³

If either the ROK or Japan exercises a nuclear option, the other seems likely to follow. Moreover, political aftershocks might occur throughout the region, as smaller nations considered developing their own nuclear capabilities. Australia presumably has the industrial capacity, though perhaps not the present incentive, to join an atomic parade.

More controversial would be Taiwan. During its early years, Taipei intermittently engaged in activities that could help develop a nuclear capability. In 2004 there were reports that the International Atomic Energy Agency had discovered evidence of experimentation with plutonium years earlier.⁸⁴ In 1974 the CIA warned that Taiwan "will be in a position to fabricate a nuclear device after five years or so."⁸⁵ Reliant on America for its defense throughout the Cold War, Taiwan was forced by U.S. pressure to dismantle some irradiation and reprocessing facilities that appeared to be part of a small nuclear program, though others remained. The government then announced that it was capable of developing nuclear weapons, but disclaimed any intent to do so. Nevertheless, nuclear research continued, until intervention by the Reagan administration in 1988.

Moreover, future developments in Taiwan are likely to reflect the status of cross-strait relations. In fact, more than a decade ago Taiwanese leader Lee Teng-hui stated publicly that Taiwan had the capability to build a nuclear weapon.⁸⁶ Although he backed away from his assertion that Taipei should reconsider its non-nuclear status, it was obvious that neither Taiwan's capability nor interest had disappeared.

In fact, the rise of the Democratic Progressive Party to power, with its call for Taiwanese independence, raised concerns about future Taiwanese policy. In 2005 Taiwan announced plans to test-fire a missile capable of hitting the Chinese mainland. The nuclear issue bestirred itself after a Taiwanese legislator predicted that President Chen would restart Taiwan's nuclear program. Among media commentary, the *China Post* worried about giving Beijing an excuse to preempt.⁸⁷ President Chen did not make any move in that direction, however, and Beijing's reaction to the flurry of speculation about a Taiwanese bomb remained understated.⁸⁸

Still, the future is hard to predict. Although relations between Beijing and Taipei have improved since President Chen Shui-bian left office, the two states remain fundamentally at odds over Taiwan's international status. A sharp deterioration in cross-strait relations with the PRC could spark a hawkish change in Taipei's policy, especially if the entire region is in flux after South Korea and Japan exercise the nuclear option.

Indeed, any attempt by Taipei to create an atomic arsenal might prove more destabilizing than any other likely nuclear development, since Taiwan lacks substantial international recognition and is more isolated globally. Obviously, regional proliferation would affect not just today's putative nuclear powers but today's current nuclear powers as well. Michael Hirsh of *Newsweek* has worried that "Nothing is likelier to make China rush into an arms race--it is now only slowly building up its forces--than a nuclear-armed Japan."⁸⁹ A Taiwanese program could have the same effect. Russia, too, might choose to respond by bolstering its nuclear forces and reengaging Northeast Asia.

This obviously is not a pleasant scenario. However, there may be an unpleasant inevitability to the expansion of nuclear weapons and enhancement of existing nuclear arsenals. For instance, Beijing is improving its nuclear capabilities to create a more credible deterrent vis-à-vis the U.S.⁹⁰

Moreover, the prospect of a North Korean bomb without a regional balance might prove to be even less palatable, since it would presume that the U.S. would continue to offer a nuclear umbrella for South Korea and Japan. Retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Thomas McNerney, for one, has favored military action to forestall a DPRK weapon, and, failing that, has advocated installing U.S. nuclear weapons in both the ROK and Japan to counterbalance the North.

A Negotiated Solution

The prospect of either war on the Korean peninsula or regional nuclear proliferation as a result of continuing North Korean development of nuclear weapons should cause all parties to work even harder to find a peaceful solution. The broad terms of a settlement are obvious—indeed, the North already has agreed to such a plan through the Six-Party Talks. However, implementation seems further away than ever.

Some analysts have proposed to reach further, attempting to limit the DPRK's development of ballistic missiles, initiate conventional arms control, open up its economy, account for Japanese kidnap victims, redress human rights violations, and implement greater personal liberty. These are worthy goals all—North Korea's government may be the most brutal and callous on earth—but the more items distasteful to Pyongyang that Washington attempts to include, the less likely agreement will be reached. Even the International Crisis Group contended: "issues such as terminating North Korea's missile program and exports, human rights, economic reform, biological and chemical weapons, and conventional force reductions should not form part of the nuclear negotiations."⁹¹ The focus should remain on eliminating the North's nuclear program.⁹²

Despite Pyongyang's ongoing intransigence, the U.S. should continue pursuing a diplomatic solution through both bilateral and regional forums. Moreover, Washington should place more responsibility on North Korea's neighbors, most importantly South Korea and the PRC, in dealing with Pyongyang. Japan and Russia, as well as the European Union, also could play constructive roles. Together, these parties should offer a package deal, with three parts: security assurances, diplomatic respect, and economic development. The first would be built on nuclear disarmament backed by a verifiable inspection regime, leading to mutual conventional force reductions. The second would be official recognition by both the U.S. and Japan. The third would be aid and trade from a variety of countries and international organizations. Although the solution would be multilateral, Washington should be willing to talk directly with the North, and even begin the process of diplomatic recognition, to help advance the process.

But such an approach has, at best, a limited likelihood of success. The U.S. should back its diplomatic strategy with the threat of continuing proliferation. Both North Korea and especially China will share in the nightmare of the North's development of nuclear weapons. The results will be unpredictable and the endpoint uncertain. But Pyongyang can find itself surrounded by hostile nuclear states, while China can see its greatest fears realized with Japan and Taiwan pursuing a nuclear course.

The objective, obviously, would not be to promote proliferation, but to use the threat of proliferation to halt North Korea's program. This approach, too, might fail. At the moment, however, the international community has few good options regarding the North.

Conclusion

The DPRK's nuclear program threatens the interests of North Korea's neighbors as well as of the U.S. Indeed, the consequences that could likely flow from the North's acquisition of nuclear weapons—war and proliferation—will threaten greater damage to countries in the region more than to America. The cost of failing to reach a diplomatic settlement will be enormous. Yet, as one U.S. official has complained, Washington faces only an array of "familiar bad choices."⁹³

The issue is likely to be resolved peacefully only if Washington commits itself to bilateral as well as multilateral talks with Pyongyang (they complement each other) and fully involves other nations in the negotiating process. If the U.S. could accept India as a nuclear power, reward Libya for yielding its nascent program, and allow the Europeans to craft a benefit package for Iran if it drops uranium enrichment, then Washington can talk to the DPRK.

But American engagement may not be enough. The PRC could play a particularly important role in dissuading the North from its nuclear course. Indeed, H.D.S. Greenway of the *Boston Globe* has advocated building on "the new climate of U.S.-Chinese cooperation of late."⁹⁴ Such a strategy would offer at least one additional benefit. Working together to defuse the North Korean nuclear crisis successfully would make it easier to resolve other disputes between Washington and Beijing, thereby laying the groundwork for a wide-ranging partnership in the years and decades ahead. Nevertheless, the most important and immediate goal remains halting nuclear proliferation in Northeast Asia.

Notes

¹ Doug Bandow is a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute and the author and editor of several books, including *Tripwire: Korea and U.S. Foreign Policy in a Changed World* (Cato Institute) and co-author of *The Korean Conundrum: America's Troubled Relations with North and South Korea* (Palgrave/Macmillan). He is a former Special Assistant to President Ronald Reagan.

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⁹² See, e.g., Doug Bandow, "All the Players at the Table: A Multilateral Solution to the North Korean Nuclear Crisis," Cato Institute Policy Analysis No. 478, June 26, 2003, p. 5.

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⁹⁴ H.D.S. Greenway, "America's Newest Partner in Asia," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, January 13, 2003, p. B6. See also former Foreign Ministry official Anne Wu extolling Beijing's interest in "positive relations" with America. Wu, "What China Whispers to North Korea," p. 38.

