

# **Nuclear Issues in U.S.-Korea Relations: An Uncertain Security Future**

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## **I. Introduction**

The security dynamics on the Korean peninsula are changing with the uncertain future associated with the North Korean claim that it now has nuclear weapons and an active program of building a "powerful deterrence force".<sup>1</sup> This dramatic reversal of Pyongyang's nuclear stance, which is more than rhetorical but action-driven, followed its announced withdrawal from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty early in 2003 and its nullification of the 1992 North-South Korean non-nuclear agreement.

Following the six-party Beijing talks in late August, the North Korean Foreign Ministry spokesperson claimed that his country no longer had "interest or expectations" for future talks on its nuclear program.<sup>2</sup> North Korea's rubber-stamp parliament, the Supreme People's Assembly also approved the government's decision to increase its "nuclear deterrence force" in angry reaction to what it called a hostile U.S. Policy.<sup>3</sup> The Agreed Framework that provided the basis of U.S.-DPRK relations after 1994 was no longer viable, because Pyongyang was found to pursue a clandestine program of HEU (highly enriched uranium) nuclear weapons development. United States relations with the Republic of Korea (ROK) have also become strained, in large part over basic differences on how to deal with North Korea and its nuclear threat.

This article addresses the varying perceptions and approaches between Seoul and Washington toward North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship and its strategic implications for the future of U.S.-ROK alliance relations. The latest episode of North Korea's nuclear controversy erupted while South Korea's Sixth Republic was undergoing electoral campaigns for the sixteenth presidential election of December 19, 2002. The saga of North Korea's nuclear threat has continued with the launching of the new Roh Moo Hyun administration in February 2003. Therefore, the foreign policy issues like the nuclear controversy and U.S.-Korea alliances are intricately inter-related with the context of a nation's domestic

politics in both the U.S. and South Korea.

## **II. Countering Nuclear Brinkmanship and Benign Anti-Americanism**

The 2002 presidential election has left the country deeply divided over the pressing policy issues of the nuclear threat from the North and the future of U.S.-Korea relations. During the election campaign the candidate Roh Moo Hyun was portrayed by the media as riding on anti-American sentiment and holding a pro-North Korean stance toward the nuclear issues. This popular perception subsequently proved to be misleading because, since his electoral victory, Roh Moo Hyun has worked closely with the U.S. George W. Bush administration to seek a common ground in checkmating the North Korean brinkmanship.

A widening gap of perception developed between the older and the younger generations over the question of collective identity. The new generation of leadership has overtaken the older Koreans, and these new leaders have little memory and no first-hand experience of the Korean War (1950-53) tragedy. The difference of perception is over the question of how to relate to communist North Korea and the traditional ally of the United States. The younger generation desires an equal partnership with the United States on critical bilateral alliance matters like the Status of Force agreement regarding the U.S. troop presence in the South. Nevertheless, these and other policy issues must be addressed, via an open dialogue and consensus-building style of leadership, if South Korea's new democracy is to make any headway in the next five years.

The atmosphere of reconciliation between Seoul and Pyongyang faced its biggest setback in December when North Korea announced the reprocessing of 8,000 fuel rods that touched off an uneasy standoff with the United States. When the Bush administration began moving to orchestrate international pressure, including economic sanctions focused on the North, this strategy was opposed by both out-going President Kim Dae Jung and his successor, president-elect Roh Moo Hyun. The Korean leaders called for a dialogue and a peaceful solution to the North's nuclear issues rather than a policy involving political isolation and economic sanctions.

Bush administration officials floated an idea of "tailored containment" of North Korea, or a ring of economic sanctions

deployed by its neighbors. The primary goal of this policy was to bring about the abandonment of Pyongyang's nuclear weapons development by isolating the North through economic channels. But South Korea's president, Kim Dae Jung, expressed his opposition, noting that four decades of economic sanctions had failed to bring down the Communist government in Cuba. Nevertheless, President Kim continued to emphasize that "through a solid military alliance with the U.S., South Korea's national security has become stronger" and that Korea's relationship with the United States was "a win-win situation that is beneficial for both states" whereby America became Korea's "biggest client as well as biggest investor"<sup>4</sup>

President-elect Roh Moo Hyun also expressed his skepticism that this policy of "tailored containment" was "an effective means to control or impose a surrender on North Korea." Roh added that "success or failure of a U.S. policy toward North Korea isn't too big a deal to the American people, but it is a life-or-death matter for South Korea" and "therefore, any U.S. move should fully consider South Korea's opinion." Hearing this objection, the Bush administration has backed away from the sanctions idea, as noted by the State Department spokesman at a subsequent news briefing.<sup>5</sup>

Continuous anti-American demonstrations and protests in South Korea also prompted talks in the United States, in Congress and on newspaper op-ed pages—that the U.S.-ROK alliance should be reviewed. If South Korea, a democracy, did not want the American troops stationed in Korea, it might be time to start withdrawals. During the fall presidential campaign, candidate Roh said he wanted the American troops to stay in Korea, thereby distancing himself from statements he had made a decade earlier when he wanted the Americans to go home. As President-elect, however, Roh was quoted as bringing up the possibility of American troop withdrawals during a meeting with South Korea's top military commanders, by saying: "I wanted to ask whether you have a long-term plan on how the South Korean military could make up for a possible reduction" in U.S. troops.<sup>6</sup>

South Korea's president-elect was operating under a new strategic vision that "If the U.S. and North Korea start a war, we will stop it," a statement he made during the presidential campaign in downtown Seoul. This led to an eleventh hour withdrawal of political support by his campaign partner, the National Alliance 21

leader, Chung Mong-joon, on the grounds that the United States was South Korea's ally and that there was no reason the U.S. would start a war against North Korea. Trained as a lawyer, Roh seems to think that Seoul could mediate disputes between Washington and Pyongyang and that a compromise settlement could be worked out between the parties in conflict. This is why Roh suggested that diplomacy and dialogue instead of confrontation and containment should be the approach to settling conflict on the Korean peninsula.

Choosing diplomacy through dialogue over the threat of force sounded good and reasonable, in theory, but Seoul must also realize that its leverage and role as an intermediary are severely limited. Seoul was not only caught in the nuclear cross-fire between Pyongyang and Washington but was also kept as a hostage by the nuclear-ambitious Stalinist North Korean regime of Kim Jong II. Moreover, an emphasis on diplomacy over force must be accompanied by a recognition that diplomacy alone does not always work in international politics. Countering North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship, which itself was an act of political strategy on the part of Pyongyang, would require appropriate strategic responses by the U.S. and its allies. These may entail combining both diplomatic negotiation and military preparedness, in order to be made credible, because Pyongyang has been playing a high-risk game in nuclear deterrence.

Pyongyang's act of nuclear brinkmanship was intended to get the attention of the outside world focused on its grievances. Pyongyang's demands on political and security issues included the guarantee by the U.S. not to launch an attack and the negotiation of a U.S.-DPRK non-aggression pact.

When North Korea broke the nuclear moratorium and violated the legal obligations associated with the 1994 Geneva Agreed Framework and the IAEA imposed safeguards, the U.S. Bush administration decided not to react by launching a pre-emptive attack against the North as it did against Saddam Hussein's Iraq but to keep the doors open for an eventual diplomatic solution to the latest controversy. The official U.S. position was that the North's bad behavior should not be rewarded and that the DPRK had to first express its willingness to renounce its nuclear program.<sup>7</sup>

The candidate Roh Moo Hyun rode to political power on the wave of massive anti-Americanism, but after his electoral victory Roh chose the high road of restoring the damaged U.S.-

ROK alliance. The means to accomplish this policy goal for the Roh administration was to seek a common ground with the Bush administration in confronting North Korea's nuclear issue and evolving a workable strategy for denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

### **III. Continuing Saga of North Korea's Brinkmanship**

In his inaugural address, Roh Moo Hyun urged North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons ambitions, spelling out the benefits Pyongyang could expect to receive in international recognition, support, and aid if it renounced its weapons drive. North Korea dismissed this plea. Instead, Pyongyang launched an anti-ship missile into the Sea of Japan (East Asia) on the eve of Roh's inauguration, thereby causing the rattling of the Asian financial market.

The new Roh Moo Hyun administration has learned quickly how to reconcile the security and the welfare needs of Korea's new democracy. There exists a delicate balance and trade-offs between the two competing sets of values called security and welfare. Security is like air that one takes it for granted. Security is oxygen that one needs and inhales to live. Without air the life of an organism cannot sustain itself. It is when one starts to lose oxygen that one realizes how invaluable the security is as an essential ingredient for sustaining freedom and democracy that people often take for granted in South Korea today.

Although the DPRK is a failing state economically, and its population is starving due to food shortages and the mismanaging of its economic resources, North Korea has acquired an ambitious program of obtaining Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). After expelling two on-site monitors from the IAEA on New Year's Eve in 2002, North Korea announced that it was restarting its nuclear fuel reprocessing laboratory that would supply them with weapons-grade plutonium. Once North Korea was allowed to attain its nuclear weapon's capability, the Korean peninsula would no longer be nuclear-free because a nuclear-armed North Korea would lead to South Korea's and Japan's eventually acquiring their own nuclear weapons capability. In order to forestall such an eventuality, it was deemed imperative that all the parties concerned, including the two Koreas and the major powers with an active interest in Korean security, begin to address the ways of defusing the tensions and

promoting confidence-building measures through discussions on arms control and disarmament.

North Korea blamed the United States for its decision to restart the nuclear program, calling it an act of self-defense in reaction to American aggression and hostile policy. Its decisions were necessary, they argued, because the U.S. President called North Korea an "axis of evil" country, together with Iraq and Iran, and made threatening statements toward them with a halt in the delivery of much-needed fuel oil. Pyongyang also criticized the Bush administration for recruiting Russia and China to pressure North Korea, saying that the crisis could and should be solved by the United States and North Korea directly without outside interference with the two agreeing to sign the non-aggression pact.<sup>8</sup>

Speaking to American troops at Fort Hood, Texas, U.S. President Bush said, "In the case of North Korea, the world must continue to speak with one voice to turn that regime away from its nuclear ambitions." Tensions between Washington and Pyongyang intensified in October 2002, when U.S. officials said North Korea had admitted to the visiting American delegation to Pyongyang that it had maintained a clandestine nuclear weapons program of enriching uranium. Ironically, what began as a fact-finding mission to resume long-stalled talks with the reclusive Stalinist North Korea turned into unproductive and failed diplomacy.

North Korea raised the stakes drastically in late December by announcing that it would reopen a nuclear complex in Yongbyon that had been mothballed under a 1994 Agreed Framework to prevent the DPRK from developing nuclear weapons. In exchange for this nuclear moratorium, North Korea was to receive two light-water reactors (LWRs), constructed by an international consortium including South Korea, Japan, and the United States, and 500,000 tons of fuel oil annually until one of the two LWRs was ready and turned over to North Korea in due course. But the shipments of fuel oil were halted in December when the U.S. learned about Pyongyang's clandestine HEU nuclear weapons program.<sup>9</sup>

This nuclear dispute and brinkmanship by North Korea triggered a series of diplomatic moves and international counter measures by IAEA. Seoul dispatched envoys to Beijing and Moscow to exchange views on how to stop Pyongyang from reactivating nuclear facilities, thereby forestalling the looming crisis that could reprocess spent fuel rods into weapon-grade plutonium. If

the 8,000 fuel rods temporarily stored away under the agreement were reprocessed, according to one analysis, the North could have enough plutonium to make three to six weapons within a month or two. One agenda of diplomacy for President Roh Moo Hyun during his state visits to the United States in May 2003, followed by similar visits to Japan and to China in the subsequent months, was to seek a common ground with its neighbors for defusing the issue of North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship.

Not surprisingly, the IAEA called for an emergency meeting of its 35-member governing council. The U.N. nuclear agency passed a resolution, on January 6, condemning North Korea's latest efforts to resume its nuclear program and giving Pyongyang an opportunity to come back into compliance with international non-proliferation agreements that it had signed. The IAEA resolution "deplores in the strongest terms North Korea's unilateral acts to impede the functioning of containment and surveillance equipment at its nuclear facilities and the nuclear material contained therein." The IAEA subsequently filed its report to the U.N. Security Council but the latter has not deliberated on the matter of the DPRK withdrawal from the NPT because of the lack of consensus among the five permanent members of the Security Council.

To defuse the escalation and confrontational atmosphere over the nuclear standoff, the trilateral coordination and oversight group (TCOG) held a meeting in Washington, D.C., attended by high-ranking diplomats from its member countries of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. The two-day conference agreed on a common negotiation strategy vis-a-vis the DPRK by seeking immediate dialogue with North Korea to address the common and mutual concerns.<sup>10</sup>

A statement of about 800 words noted, "there is no security rationale for North Korea to possess nuclear weapons" and endorsed dialogue with North Korea as a "useful vehicle for resolving serious issues." The U.S. delegation explained that the United States was "willing to talk to North Korea about how it will meet its obligations to the international community... [while stressing that] the United States will not provide quid pro quos to North Korea to live up to its existing obligations." President Bush also noted that "diplomacy will work" and he had no intention of invading North Korea.

Instead of seizing the opportunity for diplomatic settlement of its nuclear issue, Pyongyang continued to accuse the United States of spreading a "false rumor" about its nuclear program. "There is an increasing danger of a nuclear war on the Korean peninsula due to the U.S. criminal policy toward the DPRK," according to a statement released from Pyongyang's Korean Central News Agency. "The U.S. is deliberately spreading a false rumor about the DPRK's 'nuclear issue', in particular, in a bid to vitiate the atmosphere of inter-Korean reconciliation and unity and foster confrontation among Koreans," the statement insisted.<sup>11</sup> This accusation was followed by a bombshell, on January 10, that the DPRK was declaring "an automatic and immediate" withdrawal from the NPT and, one day later, that North Korea might end its self-imposed moratorium on ballistic missile tests.<sup>12</sup>

Pyongyang defended the withdrawal decision on the grounds of safeguarding the sovereignty, dignity, and the right to its existence. It charged that the U.S. "instigated the IAEA to adopt another 'resolution' against the DPRK" and "the NPT was being used as a tool for implementing the U.S. hostile policy toward the DPRK ... aimed to disarm and destroy the DPRK by force." Insisting that its withdrawal was "a legitimate and self-defensive measure" the statement added that the DPRK had "no intention to produce nuclear weapons" and its "nuclear activities at this stage [would] be confined only to peaceful purposes, such as the production of electricity."

Foreseeing the IAEA reporting on the matter to the U.N. Security Council for further action, the DPRK insisted that its withdrawal from the NPT was "totally free from the binding force of the safeguards accord with the IAEA under its Article 3." If the U.N. Security Council decides to impose sanctions against the DPRK withdrawal from the NPT, Pyongyang would consider such measures as tantamount to "an act of war" and as leading to "a holy war" and even "World War HI" they insisted.

When the IAEA governing board voted, on February 12, to cite Pyongyang for defying U.N. nuclear safeguards, and sending the issue to the Security Council, Pyongyang accused the IAEA of being "America's lapdog" and urged it to investigate instead "the illegal U.S. behavior that brought a nuclear crisis to the Korean peninsula." Since North Korea already withdrew from the NPT in January, the DPRK had no legal obligations on the IAEA safeguard,



the official KCNA news agency insisted. It also noted "discussing the nuclear issue through the IAEA was an act of interference in internal affairs."<sup>13</sup> The U.S. move to entice the U.N. Security Council to deliberate on the IAEA report on North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT was tabled when Washington learned that Russia and China were inclined to oppose such a move by the Security Council.

#### **IV. Mending U.S.-ROK Alliance Relations under Stress**

Fortunately for the United States, the Roh government's expression of its desire to strengthen the ROK alliance ties with the United States was a positive development. Upon his appointment Prime Minister Goh Kun made it known that Seoul was opposed to the scaling down of the U.S. troop presence in Korea, including a reported change in a trip wire role by the U.S. infantry division along the DMZ. The U.S.-ROK joint military exercise, Foal Eagle, was successfully launched as the new Roh administration was taking office in March.

Roh's cabinet also endorsed a plan to contribute a token number of ROK troops to the U.S.-led war on Iraq and urged the National Assembly passage of such a bill. Roh announced his support for dispatching a non-combat engineering unit of 600 soldiers and about 100 medical personnel to support coalition forces and for taking part in post-war rehabilitation efforts. Roh himself made an official state visit to meet with U.S. President George W. Bush early in May 2003, although a planned visit of U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney to Seoul in April was postponed because of the on-going Iraqi war.

Roh's Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan made a four-day visit to Washington for laying the groundwork for President Roh's first summit with U.S. President George W. Bush. Yoon's visit was also intended to clear some outstanding doubts between the two governments and to set the table for constructive dialogue between their leaders. Roh's agonizing decision on sending South Korea's non-combat troops to Iraq was well received by Washington.

During Foreign Minister Yoon's meeting with U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, Seoul reportedly presented to Washington a "road map" for a diplomatic solution to the dangerous nuclear standoff between the United States and North Korea. Yoon

subsequently explained to reporters that the plan described "step-by-step items" that may be taken to draw the North into multilateral talks. Powell said similar ideas were already on his table, and he would study it. The warm reception Yoon received in Washington was due largely to Roh's promise to support the U.S.-led coalition against Iraq. By making a timely promise of his "active support" for the unpopular war, Roh was betting on the chance to rescue the damaged U.S.-Korea alliance that he regarded as indispensable, not only to deter another devastating war on the peninsula but also to pursue inter-Korean reconciliation.

On his way back from the U.S. trip Foreign Minister Yoon Young-kwan stopped in Tokyo to pay a courtesy call on Japan's Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi. Yoon held talks with Japanese Foreign Minister Yoriko Kawaguchi, and they pledged to continue joint efforts to peacefully resolve North Korea's nuclear issue. In the meantime, Roh's top national security aide Ra Jong-yil began a four-day visit to Russia and China to discuss ways to resolve the North Korean nuclear issue. The dispatch of Ra and Yoon to the four nations could be seen as representing Roh Moo Hyun's forward looking views and optimistic approach to ending the ongoing nuclear standoff between North Korea and the United States.

The legislative voting on the troop dispatch bill was the first serious measure that turned out to be highly controversial due to anti-Iraq War popular protests, and voting on the bill was delayed twice in the National Assembly. In the end the bill received an overwhelming endorsement, with 179 in favor, 68 against, and 9 abstentions. This was a major victory for President Roh, who had told parliament that sending the troops would strengthen ties with Washington. He argued that it was essential for a peaceful solution to the DPRK nuclear crisis. Roh acknowledged, during his first address to the National Assembly, that many in the country were opposed to war in Iraq but said that "regretfully, international politics are swayed by the power of reality, not by principles." Seoul also announced plans to donate \$10 million to assist war refugees in Iraq through various U.N. agencies, including the World Health Organization and the World Food Program. In this way Roh defended his foreign policy decision on pragmatic grounds as driven by the "forces of reality."

Roh's first meeting with U.S. President George W. Bush in the White House on May 13 went well, although they were "vague

on North Korea strategy." Appearing in the Rose Garden President Bush said "We're making good progress toward achieving that peaceful resolution of the issue of the Korean Peninsula in regards to North Korea." This vague wording seems to reflect more differing approaches to the problem within the two countries. Roh told the reporters afterward: "When I left Korea, I had both concerns and hopes in my mind. Now, after having talked to President Bush, I have gotten rid of all my concerns".<sup>14</sup> A surprising thing was that the South Korean media and opposition made no big "fuss" over what seemed to have been a low (kow-tow) posture of Roh's diplomacy.

#### **V. Policy Implications and Lessons**

What are the policy implications and lessons of the unfolding drama related to the North Korean nuclear ambitions over the future of U.S.-Korea alliance and democracy in South Korea? The latest standoff between Pyongyang and Washington reflects the long-standing clash (over the inconclusive ending of the Korean War fifty years ago) and the perceptual gap between the two sides regarding Korean security and the nuclear issue. Whereas North Korea believes that the U.S. is seeking "regime change" by characterizing them as part of the "Axis of Evil," the United States is reacting angrily to North Korea's bad behavior of acquiring the WMD capability, such as a HEU program, in violation of the 1994 Agreed Framework.

Depending on how the current nuclear controversy is addressed and managed, there exists a distinct danger of North Korea's overblown rhetoric of threat and retaliation coming true as a "self-fulfilling prophesy." As of July 2003, Pyongyang seems to have crossed the red-line of the U.S. defense parameter by announcing that it is going nuclear. The possibility is now greater that the new national security strategy of the Bush administration, proclaimed in order to defeat global terrorism in the post-911 security environment, will be put into effect against Kim Jong II's North Korea.

Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld also said North Korea might pose a bigger threat as "a supplier of nuclear weapons" and as "the world's greatest proliferator of missile technology."<sup>15</sup> The literal application of the Bush's national security strategy to North Korea, especially invoking the doctrine of preemptive war,

may end up with greater tragedy of leading to Korean War II when directed to the belligerent and bellicose North Korean regime of Kim Jong II. An outbreak of the Korean War will need to be avoided by all means; it will not only undermine the economic foundation but also destroy the fragile peace sustaining the burgeoning political and civil societies of Korea's new democracy.

Clearly, the U.S. and the DPRK are locked in high-stakes diplomacy by playing the game of nuclear brinkmanship and standoff. While the U.S. was preoccupied with a war against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, so as to disarm its WMD program, the Kim Jong II regime of North Korea refuses to be intimidated by the Bush administration's call for unilateral and preemptive, even preventive, use of force by choosing to confront the Bush administration in a nuclear showdown.

As pointed out by the U.S. Institute of Peace in May 2003, the U.S. options under the circumstances were rather severely restricted: (1) do nothing; (2) try to destroy North Korea's WMD, through surgical air strike of its nuclear installation at Yongbyon and elsewhere; (3) impose economic sanctions and international pressure, through the U.N. and support by its allies and friends; (4) seek negotiated settlements, directly with the North along the lines of the framework agreement of October 1994; and, (5) seeks a bi-multilateral formula for addressing the Korean peninsula security issue and a comprehensive resolution of the Korean War issue once and for all. Since the timing was ill suited for the U.S. and favorable to North Korea, as a result of the U.S. involvement in the Iraqi War and the post-war operations in 2003, the last two choices of a quid-pro-quo settlement of the dispute between the two sides directly (the position of Pyongyang) or through a multilateral forum (the position of the Bush administration) seemed to be the only viable and workable approaches in the short run.

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell told Congress on February 13 that the DPRK had turned down a U.S. proposal to include the PRC, Russia and the ROK in talks over the DPRK's nuclear weapons programs. However, the subsequent Beijing talks in April 2003 hosted by China were a clear sign that the bi-multilateral alternative for problem-solving mentioned above can bear fruit, although the result of the first talks in April 2003 was not too encouraging.

Under this circumstance the U.S. unilateral move of redeploying U.S. ground troops away from the DMZ represents a more realistic scenario. Despite objections by Seoul, Washington has announced the U.S. Department of Defense plans to pull American troops away from the DMZ and to redeploy them in several locations in the south of the Han River. This will mean that South Korea will lose the front-line protection of the so-called tripwire role of the U.S. forces, providing the physical defense of the South against the Northern invasion since signing the armistice agreement ending the Korean War on July 27, 1953. North Korea's forward deployment of its massive troop strength, an implicit recognition of the strategic and deterrence value of the tripwire, will also be affected by the U.S. strategic move.

In a new twist, North Korea now fears that if the United States rolls up its human tripwire of 14,000 American troops, it will free the United States to bomb nuclear sites near Pyongyang.<sup>16</sup> North Korea's Central News Agency claimed that "Our army and people will answer the U.S. arms buildup with a corresponding powerful deterrent force and its pre-emptive attack with a prompt retaliation to destroy it at the initial stage of war."

In the military chess game on the Korean Peninsula, the United States gained a strategic advantage by moving American troops out of range of North Korea's border artillery, which could kill large numbers of American soldiers. Instead North Korea will opt to resume its threatening posture of turning Seoul into a "sea of fire." If the current nuclear standoff is not settled in the short-run, an uncertain security future for South Korea's will exert negative and harmful effects upon its fragile path toward economic growth and prosperity.

#### **VI. The Politics of the Six-Party Beijing Talks on the Nuclear Crisis**

All politics, including international politics and foreign policy, focused on the North Korean nuclear issue are based on considerations of power, perception, and preference. In this sense all politics are local and the politician's desire and need to stay in power and hold office will dictate the preferences on foreign policy options and policymaking. The U.S. and ROK alliance and their common strategy toward North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship will be no exception to the rule in this regard.

The respective leadership and foreign policy stance of the ROK President Roh Moo Hyun and U.S. President George W. Bush are motivated by considerations of power in domestic politics. Whereas Roh is focused on winning next year's April general election and making his party emerge as a majority in the National Assembly, Bush is focused on winning the November 2004 presidential and congressional elections in the hope of assuring Republican Party dominance in U.S. domestic politics.

In this battle for an electoral victory the perception of how each administration (in Seoul and in Washington, D.C.) is doing in domestic politics by its electoral constituency is critical for the outcome. Policy preferences, including those associated with resolving North Korea's nuclear issue, will be determined in the final analysis by the strategic calculation that will maximize the chances for electoral victory in the forthcoming national elections in 2004. The leadership of DPRK's Kim Jong II in nuclear brinkmanship, although he is not running for election, is likewise influenced by his concern for regime survival and related political strategy and calculus.

Given the fact that U.S. domestic politics is heating up as it gets close to the 2004 presidential and congressional elections, no bold and risky policy initiatives are likely to be launched by the Bush administration in dealing with the nuclear issue on the Korean peninsula. Low war risk policy options will be sought rather than radical changes in approach toward Korean security dilemma. This will mean that in the short run a formula for a peaceful and diplomatic settlement of the nuclear issue will underscore American policy rather than a forceful and confrontational approach to solving the nuclear crisis of the Korean peninsula.

The leadership in both Seoul and Washington must be cognizant of the fact, however, that Pyongyang's Kim Jong II has his own strategic plan to deny Seoul and Washington a win. Pyongyang will seek to influence and undermine the domestic political situation in the South so as to foster public perception favorable to the North. In a way, the latest move of the North in agreeing to accept six-party talks in Beijing on the nuclear issue reflects this strategic calculus on the part of North Korea's Kim Jong II.

So far, the Bush administration has been reluctant to characterize the North Korean provocation as a "crisis" that would

pose serious security threat on the Korean peninsula. In so doing, the Bush administration has resisted partisan pressure by the Democratic Party leaders to make the North Korean nuclear issue a more pressing and imminent danger to the U.S. than the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein. The Bush administration carefully resisted calls for repudiating the security threat posed by the North Korean brinkmanship as tantamount to "crisis" and escalatory tensions on the Korean peninsula.

In its diplomacy, the Bush administration has tried to downplay the "high stakes and high risk" nature of the North Korean provocation and escalation. But the decision time is rapidly dwindling and an element of surprise is increasingly undermined by the North Korean strategy of openness in its escalation and provocation. Unlike Saddam Hussein's "deceit and concealment" of a WMD program, Kim Jong Il's North Korea is more "open and public" in its posture and approach to using hyperbole and vocal pronouncement of its intentions.

Finally, Kim's strategy of nuclear brinkmanship and risk-taking seems to have born the initial, intended fruit of enticing the U.S. to a face-to-face meeting within the framework of six-party multilateral talks to be held in Beijing on North Korea's nuclear issue. This gathering of interested parties of the United States and the DPRK under the auspices of China as the host nation, participated in by the three neighboring countries of South Korea, Japan and Russia, will give a face-saving devise for launching a bi-multilateral forum for international agenda setting and for possible problem-solving on the Korean peninsula security. That effort may eventually lead to a six-power conference on overcoming the legacy of an inconclusive Korean War (1950-53) a half-century ago.

In preparation for the six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear issue, a flurry of diplomatic maneuvers and consultations took place among the interested parties in the region. Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Wang Yi traveled to Pyongyang to meet with North Korean officials to finalize the setting and timing of the six-party talks in Beijing. Chinese Foreign Minister Li Zhaoxing during his visit to Tokyo told the reporters that the talks would be held in Beijing August 26. Whereas the Russian diplomat was in Beijing, South Korea's Vice Foreign Minister visited Moscow to meet with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Losyukov who, in turn, was expected to meet with a North Korean Foreign Ministry envoy

few days later. U.S., South Korean and Japanese officials were scheduled to meet in Washington for further consultation and policy coordination.

The U.S. Bush administration hoisted a trial balloon ahead of the forthcoming six-party talks in Beijing. On August 7, Secretary of State Colin Powell sent a "subtle signal" to Pyongyang that the United States might be prepared to compromise on a top North Korean demand—a written security guarantee that the United States would not attack it. Powell said that there could be a way to "capture assurances to the North Koreans ... that there is no hostile intent" and added that "there are ways that Congress can take note of it without being a treaty or some kind of pact." A senior State Department official said that this is "not an entirely new formulation".<sup>17</sup>

The six-party Beijing talks are a classic example of a two-level diplomacy game played out in global political arena involving both formal and informal channels. All delegates presented their government's official policy positions at the meeting, while they were also open for and susceptible to informal channels of communication face to face. It was no surprise, therefore, to see that on the first day of the six-party talks on August 27, Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly emphasized in his formal presentation that the U.S. goal was a "complete, verifiable and irreversible" end to North Korea's nuclear weapons program, without spelling out a "road map" to achieve this goal. Kelly also emphasized that President Bush had said the U.S. has no intention of attacking or invading North Korea, while stressing that the U.S. would not accept Pyongyang's demand for a non-aggression treaty. He did say, however, that Washington was open to exploring other options.

In an informal bilateral session with the North Korean delegation later on the same day, the North Koreans repeated that they did possess nuclear weapons, and raised the new possibility both of conducting a nuclear test to prove they did indeed have such weapons, and also to show they had the means to deliver a bomb. The North Koreans said they had been forced to go nuclear because of the "hostile policy" of the U.S. In response, Kelly said that this was a very serious matter and that the U.S. would share this information with the other participants. On the second day, August 28, the North Koreans made a long presentation to the entire



gathering, and repeated the same points they had made privately to Kelly, to the distress of the other participants.<sup>18</sup>

Despite these unfriendly exchanges between the U.S. and North Korean delegates, Washington was reportedly 'pleased' with the outcome of the six-party Beijing talks. "We have a long, long way to go. But the U.S. delegation is recommending that the U.S. stay the course" in continuing the six-nation negotiation process. "We know that the North Koreans are the most difficult interlocutors, but we are committed to the process" and policy direction set by the president. In fact, U.S. officials said they were "pleased by the chemistry of the talks, not between Washington and Pyongyang, but among the other participants: the U.S., China, Russia, South Korea and Japan".<sup>19</sup> The three day meeting, from the U.S. points of view, had led to a situation where the other nations, except for North Korea, no longer saw the nuclear issue as just a problem between Washington and Pyongyang.

The Beijing talks were also a nuclear poker game with six players at the table, where negotiators played cards that ranged from strong to weak hands. While the first round of the six-party Beijing talks in August was largely unproductive, China was confident that it had impressed the global community, particularly the United States, with its clout with Pyongyang. Despite its vocal rhetoric, claiming nuclear deterrence as a legitimate tool of self-defense, there are signs that Pyongyang might be ready for some form of a climb-down. Pyongyang did not carry out its threat of testing potent weapons, such as a nuclear bomb or a medium range missile test-firing, on the day of the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the DPRK on September 5.<sup>20</sup> It was reported that China had told North Korea to halt its "constant war-preparation" and to concentrate instead on building up its feeble economy. Chinese President Hu Jintao allegedly offered three suggestions to the North Korean leader Kim Jong II, while making it clear that Pyongyang must dismantle its nuclear weapons program: (a) work towards attaining economic self-sufficiency; (b) try out a Chinese-style open-door policy; and, (c) improve relations with neighboring countries after halting its WMD program.<sup>21</sup> If true, this is a clear case of strong-arm diplomatic tactics by China toward North Korea in exchange for continuing China's close ties with Pyongyang and also China's desire to improve its future relations with the United States.

## VII. Concluding Remarks

The outcome of this diplomatic gathering will impact U.S.-ROK relations as to the future course of action and will focus new direction on alliance relations in the years to come. North Korea's "secretly developing a nuclear weapons program" was a key justification for the U.S. Bush administration policy imposing economic sanctions and directing efforts toward further political isolation and regime change in the North. It has also led to the U.S. administration's seeking (a) a new theatre missile defense system; (b) increased military spending; and, (c) continued U.S. troop presence in Asia and in South Korea. The 9-11 attack on America and the Bush administration resolve to address the transnational terrorism threat to U.S. security has added complexity to an otherwise familiar and conventional episode of the latest nuclear controversy over North Korea.

These and related policies of the U.S. administration will be affected by the proposed six-party talks on North Korea's nuclear issue. Under the regionalization strategy pursued by the Bush administration, the North Korean nuclear issue will become a multi-lateral agenda to accommodate the changing security dynamics alluded to above. Clearly, the Roh Moo Hyun administration policy on inter-Korean relations will be impacted by the (a) outcome of the April 2004 parliamentary elections and (b) the results of the November 2004 U.S. presidential election that will determine whether the current Bush administration will be re-elected. An uncertain security future awaits the Roh Moo Hyun administration in the days ahead.

## Notes

1. Pyongyang's official position is that the DPRK exercises its "sovereign right to develop nuclear power for peaceful purposes." Its acquiring nuclear capability for generating electricity, however, is only partially correct. In June 2003 Pyongyang indirectly admitted for the first time its true intention of acquiring the nuclear weapons capability for deterrence against the U.S. (David E. Sanger, "North Korea Says It Seeks to Develop Nuclear Arms," *The New York Times*, June 10, 2003). Pyongyang also considers nuclear weapons as a guarantor of its regime survival, when its foreign ministry said, on April 18,

2003, that 'The Iraqi war teaches a lesson that in order to prevent war and defend the security of a country and the sovereignty of a nation, it is necessary to have a powerful deterrent force only.'

2. Joseph Kahn, "North Korea Says It is Against More Talks," *The New York Times*, September 1, 2003.

3. "North Korea parliament backs nuke build-up," CNN.Com, September 3, 2003.

4. "President Kim Emphasizes US Alliance," *Digital Chosunilbo*, December 31, 2002.

5. James Brooke, "South Opposes Pressuring North Korea," *The New York Times*, January 1, 2003.

6. Ibid.

7. David E. Sanger, "U.S. Eases Threat on Nuclear Arms for North Korea," *The New York Times*, December 30, 2002.

8. Elizabeth Rosenthal, "North Korea Defends Decision to Restart Nuclear Program," *The New York Times*, January 3, 2003.

9. Pyongyang denied a U.S. State Department delegation claim that it had admitted the existence of highly enriched uranium (HEU) program. However, the North Korean negotiator told the U.S. delegate, during their first Beijing talks in April 2003, that it indeed had already acquired nuclear bombs.

10. Steven R. Weisman, "U.S., in a Shift, Is Willing to Talk with North Korea About A-Arms," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2003.

11. "N. Korea slams U.S. 'Criminal Policy'" [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com), January 8, 2000.

12. North Korea had once threatened to withdraw in 1993, but reversed its stance three months later after obtaining an agreement with the U.S. Clinton Administration to defuse the nuclear standoff in June.

13. "North Korea Accuses Nuke Agency of Meddling," *The Associated Press*, Seoul, February 14, 2003.

14. David E. Sanger, "Bush and New President of South Korea Are Vague on North Korea Strategy," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2003.

15. Powell Says North Korea Rejects U.S. Proposal Talk," *The Associated Press*, Washington, DC, February 14, 2003.

16. James Brook, "DMZ Twist: U.S. Retreat Unsettles North Korea," *The New York Times*, June 16, 2003.

17. Andrea Koppel, "U.S. lays ground for N. Korea meet," [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com), August 9, 2003.

18. John King, "North Korea 'ready to show' nuke capability," [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com), August 29, 2003.

19. Mike Chinoy, "Washington 'pleased' with talks," [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com), August 29, 2003.

20. Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "China seeks payback for N. Korea efforts," [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com), September 16, 2003.

21. Willy Wo-Lap Lam, "Time to act, China tells N. Korea," [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com), August 25, 2003.

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