



Deja Vu All Over Again?

by Ralph A. Cossa

Seoul: Is it deja vu all over again on the Korean Peninsula? The short answer is "yes!" . . . and "no!"

North Korea seems to be following its time-honored pattern, witnessed most prominently during the 1993-94 nuclear crisis that led to the now "nullified" Agreed Framework. Like today, the North was then suspected of cheating on nuclear-related international agreements: the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) and its associated International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Safeguards Agreement. Its response was to announce a planned withdrawal from the NPT, thus creating a diplomatic crisis that came uncomfortably close to resulting in a military confrontation. (Then-U.S. Secretary of Defense William Perry has acknowledged that the U.S. was very close to resorting to military force - a surgical strike against the Yongbyon nuclear facility - before former U.S. President Jimmy Carter inserted himself into the process and led the two sides away from a confrontation and toward a negotiated settlement under the Agreed Framework.)

Having been once again caught cheating, Pyongyang has resorted to form, this time surprisingly admitting its sins before seemingly walking away from the Agreed Framework and once again creating a diplomatic challenge that could lead to hostilities if mismanaged. For Pyongyang it seems to be business as usual. North Korea's second in command, Kim Yong-nam, has reportedly said that Pyongyang is now ready to engage in dialogue to "resolve security concerns" with Washington if the U.S. is "willing to withdraw its hostile policy" toward the North. Meanwhile, Radio Pyongyang continues to claim that the North has been fulfilling its Agreed Framework commitments "more than 100 percent," calling U.S. allegations "ridiculous," even as Kim Yong-nam was assuring his ROK interlocutors that "we are taking the recent situation seriously."

Some have drawn parallels with the North's recent "confess, apologize, and negotiate" approach to Tokyo regarding the abduction issue. But in that case, the North's strategy seemed well thought out in advance. In the latest case, it appeared more impromptu, following an alleged all-night meeting, and after initial vigorous denials of the accusations. The ultimate objective may have been the same, however: reaping benefits not from good behavior but from confessing and promising to stop the bad behavior (although there has yet to be a promise to stop in this latest incident and the North does not seem the least bit apologetic).

Here the parallels to 1993-94 and the abductees issue (rightfully) end! The Bush administration has made it clear, even while avoiding potentially counterproductive threatening language, that there will be no negotiations - and thus no hope of rewards for bad behavior - until the North lives up to its previous

agreements. While the State Department has announced that Washington was previously willing to engage in constructive dialogue and even to develop a more productive political and economic relationship with the North, all this has been put on hold until the North declares (and demonstrates) its willingness to give up its various nuclear weapons programs.

This strikes me as the right approach, but it needs to be more carefully spelled out and more vigorously backed by Seoul, Tokyo, and hopefully others (including Beijing and Moscow).

President Bush has declared his willingness to seek a diplomatic solution to this problem and this stance should make it easier to gain international backing (especially compared with the "threaten first and then seek consensus later" approach followed toward Iraq). What he needs to do during his summit meeting with ROK President Kim Dae-jung and Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro is to clearly spell out his preconditions for a resumption of U.S.-DPRK dialogue: a declared halt to the North's nuclear weapons programs, followed by an invitation to the IAEA to begin the long-awaited verification inspections at Yongbyon (as called for under the Agreed Framework) and to inspect the new suspected uranium enrichment facilities identified by Washington (to include the supervised destruction of weapons-related equipment found at these locations).

Entering into new negotiations before Pyongyang demonstrates its willingness to live up to previous agreements sends a decidedly wrong message. But President Bush should also reiterate his administration's pledge to engage in constructive dialogue, once Washington's immediate security concerns are satisfactorily (and verifiably) addressed.

President Bush should also endorse continued dialogue with North Korea by both South Korea and Japan, if for no other reason than to help underscore the seriousness of the current situation. However, Prime Minister Koizumi should make it clear in his own statement that, while dialogue will continue, there will be no real progress toward normalization (and the potential windfall assistance that this promises) until the nuclear issue is resolved. This should be relatively easy for Koizumi to do, given growing public anger with Pyongyang over the abduction issue.

Meanwhile, President Kim, instead of pressuring Washington to resume talks with Pyongyang (his natural tendency), must also endorse Washington's preconditions and announce that further progress in North-South relations will also hinge on Pyongyang removing this clear and present danger to the people of South Korea. This is more problematic. While Seoul has called for immediate North Korean compliance with its nuclear agreements (including one reached with the South in 1992), the Kim administration has a tendency to want to continually lower the bar for the North - witness its hailing of this week's vague joint statement (which it had to drag out of Pyongyang after an added day of negotiations) to "cooperate positively to solve all issues

including nuclear-related problems through dialogue” as an “official clarification” of the North's willingness to resolve the problem (which was not even specifically acknowledged).

All of the leading ROK presidential candidates have also called on North Korea to abandon its nuclear weapons program immediately and the two leading candidates, Lee Hoi-chang and Chung Moon-joon, have also tied compliance to future economic assistance. President Kim should likewise indicate that, while dialogue and humanitarian assistance will continue, significant amounts of aid, and especially hard currency payments that could easily be diverted to pay for a nuclear weapons program, will be reconsidered, if not suspended, until the North shows some serious movement on the nuclear weapons issue.

The current situation today represents a diplomatic challenge; it is not yet a crisis. All sides need to avoid turning it into one. For its part, Washington must continue to stress the diplomatic approach and avoid saber-rattling. It might even want to allow previously-contracted heavy fuel oil shipments to continue. But this does not mean that Washington should retreat from its stance that verifiable compliance with old agreements is an unyielding precondition to any new talks.

Meanwhile, North Korea must understand that precipitous action on its part - a decision to try to reprocess or otherwise disturb the canned spent fuel rods currently under IAEA supervision at Yongbyon comes most readily to mind - could set a dangerous chain of events into motion... and this administration will be considerably less likely to let Jimmy Carter once again save the day.

Ralph A. Cossa is president of the Pacific Forum CSIS.