



## **Pyongyang's Dangerous Game**

by Ralph A. Cossa

In the past week, North Korea has attempted to create a crisis on the Korean Peninsula by threatening to restart its frozen nuclear reactor while demanding that the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) remove monitoring devices aimed at ensuring that the reactor operates in accordance with Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) safeguard procedures. Conventional wisdom is that Pyongyang is creating a fuss in order to force the Bush administration into new negotiations. This may, in fact, be true. But I doubt that this is the only, or perhaps even the primary, reason.

In examining Pyongyang's actions, the first question that needs to be asked is "why now?" Is it a pure coincidence that North Korea is creating this new stand-off - immediately in the wake of another potential crisis caused by its attempt to secretly ship missiles to the Middle East - immediately before South Korea's presidential elections? I think not!

At a minimum, Pyongyang would have factored the election into its timing. More likely, it represents a heavy-handed attempt to influence the outcome. One can debate whether the North's actions would benefit the conservative or liberal candidate; understanding the level of the North's understanding of ROK domestic politics is no easy task. But attempts to meddle in ROK politics should come as no surprise. Last year Pyongyang suddenly agreed to resume North-South dialogue the evening before a scheduled vote of no confidence against then-Minister of Reunification Lim Dong-won, the architect of the ROK's Sunshine Policy. (The tactic backfired; the vote proceeded and Lim was removed from office. After one meeting, the North once again canceled its talks with the South.)

North Korea also recognizes that ROK-U.S. relations are currently under considerable strain, exacerbated by the continued fallout over a tragic traffic accident last June in which two South Korean teenagers were killed. Trying to create a crisis now helps to feed anti-American feelings due to unhappiness among many Koreans over Washington's hard-line policy toward the North. This creates a "win-win" situation for Pyongyang. Either Washington comes to the table (where Pyongyang hopes to once again get rewarded for its bad behavior) or its refusal continues to feed anti-Americanism in the South (with election implications).

There may be yet another contributing factor. North Korea's threat to restart its reactor - which it has a legal right to do, provided IAEA safeguards remain in effect - also attracts attention away from the main problem at the root of its current stand-off with the U.S.: its secret uranium-enrichment program, undertaken in direct violation of a number of international and North-South agreements. Washington has refused to restart its dialogue with North Korea until this program is ended. "Why should we enter into new negotiations," Washington asks, "when

the North is not honoring its past commitments?" Trick me once, shame on you. Trick me twice, shame on me.

It's possible that North Korean misinterpretation of last week's ship boarding may have also contributed to Pyongyang's action. A North Korean merchant ship was stopped in the Indian Ocean (by a Spanish ship participating in a UN-sanctioned multinational force to prevent the flow of weapons to al-Qaeda or Iraq). A U.S. inspection team discovered missiles, which were not declared as cargo on the ship's manifest. Once the destination of these weapons was ascertained - Yemen, which has a right to purchase such systems from North Korea or elsewhere - the ship was allowed to continue to its stated destination.

To an informed observer, the system worked exactly as it should. A suspicious ship was stopped, as it turned out with good cause. Once the destination of its cargo was confirmed and was deemed legal, the ship continued on its way. Everyone acted in accordance with the law; everyone, that is, except the North Koreans, who have yet to explain why their ship was flying without a flag and why the (legal) cargo was not declared. Could it be that they were attempting to create a crisis and were frustrated that Washington did not take the bait, thus forcing them to create a new one?

The conclusion I drew from the ship boarding was that Washington, despite accusations of unilateralism and preemptive tendencies, still follows the rule of law. Pyongyang may have drawn the conclusion, fed by speculation in the press, that this incident demonstrates that Washington is so preoccupied with Iraq that it will issue the North free passes to misbehave or will go to any extreme to avoid a confrontation with Pyongyang. This could be a dangerous assumption.

President Bush, during his visit to Seoul in February 2002, stated unambiguously that the U.S. had no intention of invading North Korea. This does not mean that Washington will stand idly by if the North puts the U.S. or its friends and allies at risk. Just as military force was used to stop and inspect the North Korean ship, so too might it be used to prevent other attempts to proliferate or in the face of imminent threats. .

Restarting the Yongbyon nuclear reactor, with or without IAEA safeguards, does not constitute an immediate threat, however. The reactor would have to run for an extended period of time before new weapons grade plutonium or highly enriched uranium is produced, much less reprocessed and fabricated into a weapon. Nor will this reactor provide needed energy this winter or put food on North Korean tables. The best way for this to be accomplished is for North Korea to respond positively to the international community's demand to end its various nuclear weapons programs and come into full compliance with its international obligations.

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