



## **Avoiding "World War Three" by Ralph A. Cossa**

Help me get this straight!

Country A was caught, again, cheating on its international (and several bilateral) commitments; country B said it would not negotiate any new agreements with A until it comes into compliance with its previous ones.

But, country B says it seeks, and will patiently pursue, a diplomatic solution. In return, country A warns that it is running out of patience and that a "catastrophic crisis of a war" is inevitable if B does not comply with its demands, further threatening "World War Three" if the international community attempts to intercede.

B says it will not respond to "blackmail" even as A is demanding payment in advance to (once again) rejoin the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), despite near-universal global condemnation over its withdrawal.

So B starts waving some olive branches, making a distinction between "talking" and "negotiating," in an attempt to appear more accommodating. But, the more B lowers its voice, the louder and more threatening A becomes. As B continues to describe the situation as a "diplomatic showdown, not a military crisis," A continues to take provocative steps, unilaterally, to ensure that a crisis atmosphere prevails, while accusing the "Bush warlike group" of attempting "to provoke a war of aggression . . . through its talk about dialogue and security assistance."

So, tell me again, which one is pursuing the "hardline" policy?

This is not to say that Washington has distinguished itself in the handling of this (dare I say it?) crisis; it has not. It has taken the Bush administration far too long to figure out that how it says things is as important as what it says. Recently, the Bush administration, in what has been hailed as a softening of attitude (some say a major policy reversal), said it was prepared to pursue a previously promised "bold approach" and would talk with Pyongyang about its "international obligations," even though it would not provide "quid pro quos" to get Pyongyang to live up to these existing obligations. Previously, it argued that it would not yield to blackmail or negotiate until Pyongyang verifiably agreed to dismantle its clandestine programs, even though Washington was keeping diplomatic channels open.

As the Bush administration itself admits, this is more a change in emphasis than in policy. But at least it is now accentuating the positive, allowing President Bush finally to

appear less unreasonable or stubborn than North Korea's "Dear Leader" Kim Jong-il. This new U.S. attitude makes it easier for the incoming Roh Moo-hyun administration to deal positively with Washington.

Meanwhile the North continues to try to have it both ways, claiming it needs a nuclear program to defend against Washington's "preemptive nuclear threats" while claiming that it is not pursuing a weapons program but is merely trying to produce electricity. It also denies confessing that it had a clandestine uranium enrichment facility while telling New Mexico Gov. Bill Richardson that it is willing to discuss this program with Washington.

Either Pyongyang wants to negotiate or it wants nuclear weapons. If it's the former, then all it has to do is invite the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to return and open up its facilities (including the uranium enrichment plant) to inspections to prove that it is honoring past agreements. Bush's "bold approach" will then follow. If it's the latter, then nothing Washington will say or do is likely to have much impact.

The next significant step in this drama takes place next week in Seoul when a new round of South-North ministerial talks are held. Quite correctly, both Seoul and Washington have agreed that this channel of communications should be kept open. But what message will outgoing President Kim Dae-jung choose to give the North in what is likely to be his administration's last high-level direct interaction with Pyongyang?

First, he should disabuse Pyongyang of the notion that this is a Korea (North and South) vs. U.S. crisis, as Pyongyang has increasingly been declaring. North Korea has pitted itself not just against the U.S. but against the entire international community by its decision to withdraw from the NPT and expel IAEA inspectors, while removing monitoring devices that would not inhibit Pyongyang's reactivating its Yongbyon nuclear reactor (which it has every right to do) but would add credence to its claim that it is not pursuing nuclear weapons. After all, if Pyongyang declares war against the U.S., as it continually threatens to do, this means a declaration of war against the ROK as well.

Second, he must explain to North Korea that any attempt to open its plutonium reprocessing facility at Yongbyon directly violates the North-South Denuclearization Agreement negotiated by the "Great Leader" Kim Il-sung himself (Kim Jong-il's father and sole source of legitimacy) and thus constitutes a hostile gesture toward the South. (A clandestine uranium enrichment program falls into the same category.)

Finally, he should note that the fastest way toward securing a non-aggression treaty with Washington - Pyongyang's stated goal - would be to pursue a formal peace treaty with Seoul, something the North has refused to discuss since it opted out of the Four-Party Talks in 1999. Washington and Beijing - the other two parties and signatories of the 1953 armistice that a formal treaty would replace - should also express their joint willingness to provide Pyongyang with security assurances if it verifiably abandons its nuclear weapons programs and enters into direct peace negotiations with the South. For all President Kim's great accomplishments, he has yet to get Pyongyang to acknowledge that Seoul is a legitimate interlocutor on Peninsula security matters.

It's time for China to start speaking out much more forcefully on this issue as well. Beijing has the most to lose (after Pyongyang) if the North's decision to withdraw from the NPT reaches the UN Security Council floor. Does it risk its equally important relationship with the South and undo the past year's significant effort to get Sino-U.S. relations on track by backing an ungrateful North Korea? Does Beijing really want to be on the "wrong side of history" in this debate?

As long as Pyongyang believes that its policies are driving a wedge between Washington and Seoul (among others), it is likely to keep up its escalation game. It needs to hear in no uncertain terms from Seoul, and from Beijing, that it has gone too far, if there is to be any hope for diplomacy to work. More calls for a negotiated solution from Kim Dae-jung and inscrutable nods and winks from Beijing just won't do. Why aren't Seoul and Beijing willing to tell Pyongyang forcefully that it must behave or it will suffer (self-inflicted) isolation from the international community?

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