



Dealing with the DPRK: Time to Face the Problem

by Ralph A. Cossa

While the Bush administration is to be commended for not overreacting (or reacting in kind) to North Korea's saber rattling and for its commitment to seek a diplomatic solution to the current nuclear standoff, Washington needs to stop pretending that there is no "crisis" or that there is no difference between one to two suspected nuclear devices and a full-blown nuclear weapons program involving the extraction of enough plutonium to make (or sell) numerous bombs. This is both a Peninsula security and a nonproliferation crisis, and must be dealt with as such.

To be fair, it is wrong to accuse the Bush administration of ignoring the problem. A great deal of diplomatic effort has gone into tightening the noose around Pyongyang and demonstrating to its leadership that its actions are only further isolating the "hermit kingdom" and putting its people at greater disadvantage. President Bush's willingness to wave some carrots in front of Pyongyang - his promise of a "bold approach" toward future cooperation in return for North Korean compliance with its previous nuclear obligations - is likewise a positive gesture that has not been sufficiently recognized and praised by Seoul. Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's assertion that the U.S. can deal simultaneously with Iraq and North Korea and his alert order to prepare for the deployment of strategic bombers and attack aircraft to East Asia if needed, underscore President Bush's reminder that "all options remain on the table" despite his current commitment to a peaceful solution.

North Korean leader Kim Jong-il appears to have drawn the conclusion that he has a free pass to misbehave as long as Washington remains focused on (and refuses to be diverted from) Iraq. "All options" assertions are likely viewed as not very credible, especially since Seoul keeps handing out the carrots while ruling out the sticks. Unless Washington and Seoul can jointly convince the North that its decision to actively pursue nuclear weapons will threaten, rather than enhance, North Korea's national security, Pyongyang's efforts to pursue a nuclear weapons program will continue unabated.

In criticizing the Bush administration's policy toward North Korea, many Koreans (North and South) call for a return to the policies of the Clinton administration. They forget that President Clinton was prepared to use force to prevent North Korea from developing nuclear weapons. When former Secretary of Defense William Perry says "the credibility of our determination to remove the nuclear threat even if it risks war" is a key ingredient in any possible solution to the current standoff, he speaks from experience; he was drawing up the plans for military action at the same time

former President Jimmy Carter was striking the deal that made military action unnecessary in 1994.

But the other key ingredient, according to Dr. Perry, is "the courage and the confidence to pursue creative diplomatic alternatives to war." Washington needs to be - and to appear in the eyes of its allies, and especially South Koreans, to be - more flexible and forthcoming in dealing with Pyongyang. This does not mean that asking a former president to go to Pyongyang is the answer, although sending a high-level emissary (former Secretary of State James Baker or former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft) at some point in the future should not be ruled out. It does mean making the North Koreans an offer they can't refuse, or one which, if refused, would leave little doubt that North Korea is interested in nothing less than developing nuclear weapons.

The Bush administration needs to go beyond vague references to a "bold approach" and, as Scowcroft recently argued, "offer a clear vision of the diplomatic solution it favors - and a road map to get there." The urgency of the crisis, Scowcroft argues, "brooks no delay over matters of form." While the administration's offer of a 5+5 forum remains a reasonable one, agreeing to bilateral discussions does not "reward" Pyongyang for past indiscretions. Combining both approaches could provide a way forward.

Several security specialists (including Scowcroft and, separately, former State Department officials Robert Einhorn and Alan Romberg) have offered various "win-win" formulas where Washington agrees to full-scale negotiations in exchange for and concurrent with a freeze in all North Korean nuclear activities (as opposed to the current precondition that a verifiable halt must precede such talks). This would test the North's sincerity and help convince others (especially in Seoul) that firmer measures are required, should Pyongyang come up with reasons to reject this offer as well.

Meanwhile, new ROK President Roh Moo-hyun has stated that he is committed to working closely with Washington, Tokyo, China, Russia, and others, to "resolve the nuclear issue through dialogue." If so, rather than just call for talks, he should formally offer to host a multilateral senior officials meeting (at the assistant secretary or higher level) to bring all the concerned parties (including North Korea) to the table before North Korea takes steps - such as beginning to reprocess its spent fuel - that may force a military confrontation.

For its part, Washington should reinforce its earlier stated willingness to meet separately with Pyongyang along the sidelines of such a meeting (which should also include a North-South bilateral on the nuclear issue). An agreement by

Washington and Seoul that reprocessing represents a "red line" that will require a reassessment of the current joint U.S.-ROK commitment to a peaceful solution would provide some added incentive for Pyongyang to accept such an offer.

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