



## **U.S.-DPRK: Tightening the Noose**

by Ralph A. Cossa

Washington's strategy of applying international pressure to further isolate North Korea appears to be working, thanks in large part to the actions of one country in particular.

No, I am not talking about China, although China's willingness finally to get tough with the North and its hosting of the trilateral "talk about talks" in Beijing in April - which put senior U.S. and North Korean officials at the same table (with Chinese interlocutors) for the first time since the crisis started last October - have certainly been helpful. Nor am I talking about South Korea, although President Roh Moo-hyun's politically courageous decision to move closer to the U.S. position and warn of "further steps" has been instrumental to the process.

The country that deserves the most credit for Washington's success has been North Korea, simply by being its typical belligerent, uncompromising, almost laughingly threatening self. Let's quickly review the bidding. The crisis began in October when Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly visited Pyongyang and informed the North Koreans that Washington would not enter into any new agreements until Pyongyang stopped cheating on its previous commitments. A complete, verifiable, immediate halt to North Korea's clandestine nuclear programs was a prerequisite to further progress. Washington later sweetened the pie by promising a "bold approach" toward Pyongyang, including economic and energy assistance, but only after it abandoned its nuclear programs; programs which Pyongyang may or may not have acknowledged it was pursuing, depending on which version of events you choose to believe. (Kelly, to his credit, has stuck with one version; Pyongyang has put forth numerous versions of what it did or did not say or admit.)

At first, both sides were criticized by the international community for being too stubborn. Pyongyang said it would only discuss the matter directly and bilaterally with the U.S., while demanding a nonaggression pact as the quid pro quo for stopping its program. Meanwhile, Washington insisted there would be no new negotiations until Pyongyang honored its previous commitments, but promised to deal with the issue diplomatically, even while keeping "all options on the table." Pyongyang immediately escalated the "crisis" (a term everyone but Washington uses to describe the ongoing sequence of events) by expelling International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors, removing monitoring devices, and announcing that it was restarting its frozen nuclear reactor at Yongbyon and was (or was about to start) reprocessing its spent nuclear fuel.

In January, when Washington sent a tentative olive branch Pyongyang's way - distinguishing between negotiations (which it would not engage in) and talks (which it would) and putting in writing (at the Trilateral Coordination and Oversight Group or TCOG meeting) that it did not intend to invade North Korea - Pyongyang responded by withdrawing from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and later by intercepting and reportedly attempting to force down a U.S. reconnaissance plane over international waters. Then, when Washington offered multilateral dialogue - given that North Korea's actions threatened all its neighbors, not to mention the international nonproliferation regime - Pyongyang refused in particular to allow its Southern brothers, whose security is most threatened, to sit at the table, adding further insult by declaring the 1992 South-North Denuclearization Agreement to be nullified.

Today, Washington continues to insist on an immediate, complete, verifiable halt to Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programs while insisting that only multilateral dialogue should occur. While one could have been sympathetic to Pyongyang's assertion that this was a bilateral U.S.-DPRK matter last October, its above-referenced actions have made Washington's point that this is an international matter.

Meanwhile, every time North Korea inches closer to admitting that it has nuclear weapons, it makes it harder for any responsible member of the international community to argue its case, especially as Washington continues to pledge its commitment to a peaceful diplomatic solution while Pyongyang, on any given day, threatens a war against the U.S., South Korea, Japan, and/or the international community in general; a war everyone knows it could not win.

Another Washington success, once again spurred by a North Korean threat (reportedly whispered in Secretary Kelly's ear in Beijing in April) to export nuclear materials - not to mention its long-standing reputation as a smuggler of drugs and other contraband - was widespread support among 11 Asia-Pacific and European nations in Madrid last week for a U.S. "Proliferation Security Initiative" aimed at intercepting illegal weapons of mass destruction (WMD) shipments on the high seas. This was followed by strong statements against WMD proliferation at this week's ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) gathering in Cambodia. The assembled ARF ministers (including Secretary of State Colin Powell, but not North Korea's foreign minister, who was conspicuous by his absence) urged North Korea to resume its cooperation with the IAEA and rejoin the NPT, while expressing unanimous support for the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, even as North Korea threatened to "put further spurs to increasing its nuclear deterrent force" while threatening "limitless" retaliation against any who dared interfere.

Pyongyang just doesn't seem to get it: pursuing a nuclear weapons program is hazardous to its health . . . and to its

economy (what's left of it). Amusingly, it argued last week that it needed nuclear weapons in order to save on costs associated with maintaining such a large conventional force. But the economic and political costs of coming out of the nuclear closet will be much greater than any presumed savings, since South Korea, among others, has warned that going down that "blind alley" will result in an end to the current economic cooperation with Seoul that helps keep Pyongyang afloat. Meanwhile, it has been Pyongyang's conventional weapons threat, most specifically its ability to target Seoul with its missiles and heavy artillery that has served as its best security blanket for years, since the costs associated with a war exceeded those of tolerating this truly reprehensible regime. Adding nuclear weapons to the mix could change this calculus. Ironically, the best way for Pyongyang to counter Washington's strategy would be to stop acting like itself and challenge the Bush administration to take "yes" for an answer. Agree to a nuclear freeze, invite the IAEA inspectors back in, rejoin the NPT, and then sit down in a multilateral setting and respectfully request the security guarantees and economic benefits that have been promised. Or, it can continue helping Washington tighten the noose around its own neck.

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