



North Korea: Digging Deeper Holes by Ralph A. Cossa

Someone needs to remind North Korea about the “first rule of holes”; namely, when you find yourself in one, stop digging!

Having been faced with firm resistance from the other five parties - China, Japan, Russia, South Korea, and the U.S. - regarding its “so-called nuclear weapons program,” Pyongyang chose to remove the last vestiges of ambiguity, acknowledging at the recently-concluded six-party talks in Beijing that it not only had a “nuclear deterrent force” but planned to increase it, as a result of Washington's unchanged “hostile attitude.” North Korea's representative, Vice Foreign Minister Kim Yong-Il, also reportedly indicated that Pyongyang was “prepared to prove that it could successfully deliver and explode” nuclear weapons, although the official North Korean version of his remarks does not include this comment.

(North Korea had made such claims to American interlocutors before but this is the first time the claim has been made before a wider audience. On a slightly positive note, Kim apparently did not repeat an earlier threat to also export such weapons.)

Minister Kim also directly contradicted the post-conference announcement by Beijing that all six had agreed to follow-on talks (while promising to not “escalate the situation”), stating that Pyongyang was “no longer interested” in six-way talks and was, instead, accelerating its nuclear weapons program. It is unclear if this represents an official rejection of future talks or is mere bluster, aimed at encouraging Beijing (or others) to provide some additional incentives [read: bribes] to North Korea to ensure a second appearance.

North Korea's repeated references to its “nuclear deterrence force” provide the clearest acknowledgment to date that it already possesses nuclear weapons. A formal declaration that it is a nuclear weapons state, possibly accompanied by a nuclear test, is now feared, perhaps on the 55th anniversary of the founding of the North Korean state on Sept 9. This would leave Washington with little option other than to push for UN Security Council action against Pyongyang and, most importantly, would give Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow little option other than to finally support this course of action - all currently think going to the UNSC is “premature.”

Surely Pyongyang will stop digging before the hole reaches the appropriate depth to serve as a grave for the Kim Jong-il regime . . . or will it?

(Of note, ROK President Roh Moo-hyun's National Security Advisor Ra Jong-yil stated prior to the talks that his government would stop all economic assistance if “suspicions of nuclear weapons are confirmed.” While one wonders how much more proof Seoul requires, a test or outright declaration presumably would finally force Seoul to end its current policy of denial.)

For its part, Washington reportedly showed some flexibility at the Beijing talks, while still not budging from its ultimate goal: a complete, verifiable, irreversible end to the North's various nuclear weapons programs. While Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly's talking points have not been released, the Chinese representative, Vice Foreign Minister Wang Li, stated that Kelly asserted that “the U.S. had no intention to threaten North Korea, no intention to invade and attack North Korea, no intention to work for regime change in North Korea.” These assurances notwithstanding, Kelly firmly rejected the North's demand that Washington enter into a legally binding nonaggression pact with Pyongyang.

There are at least five reasons Washington rejects a bilateral pact. The one most frequently cited - and in my view the least persuasive - is that the U.S. “will not yield to blackmail” or “reward bad behavior.” In truth, any solution (other than regime change) will ultimately reward the North's current bad behavior. The only question is: will we pay in advance (we won't and shouldn't) or later (with others helping foot the bill)?

Some have also argued that the U.S. cannot make such a deal because the Congress would never approve it. This may be true; the 1994 deal was called the Agreed Framework (rather than the Framework Agreement) to avoid the ratification issue and, as a result, was never legally binding. But, would a Republican Congress really embarrass its leader and reject a deal that President Bush stood firmly behind?

Much more convincing is the argument that we have bought that horse before. What the North is selling - a nuclear weapons-free Peninsula - was not only purchased by the U.S. in 1994 but by South Korea earlier (the 1992 North-South Denuclearization Agreement) and since (the 2000 Pyongyang Summit Declaration), not to mention by Russia, which built

the initial Yongbyon reactors after the North Koreans made a similar pledge to the international community by signing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice (or three or four times), shame on me (and the rest of us). In demanding that North Korea denuclearize, Washington is only asking Pyongyang to do what it has already promised to do - and received payment for doing - several times in the past.

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If the deal wasn't unacceptable enough, North Korea's time lines make it even more so. All Pyongyang is willing to do in advance of a pact being signed is to "declare its will to scrap its nuclear program." Monitoring and inspection can only come later, after the treaty has been signed, diplomatic relations have been established, and Pyongyang has been "compensated for the lack of electricity" caused by the self-inflicted breakdown of the Agreed Framework. Given Pyongyang's track record, why would any nation seriously pursue this course?

The last and most important reason to reject a bilateral agreement is because it cuts Seoul out of the Peninsula peace-making process; a long-time DPRK objective that all previous ROK and U.S. governments have wisely rejected. Signing a bilateral nonaggression pact would violate Washington's 1996 pledge never to pursue (much less sign) any agreement dealing with peace on the Peninsula that excluded Seoul.

Tokyo reminds us of a possible sixth reason as well: if Washington signs a bilateral treaty with Pyongyang, does this mean it cannot respond to a North Korean attack against Japan? Japan and South Korea are more likely targets of North Korean aggression than is Washington; both must be included in any nonaggression pact.

A six-party nonaggression pact - or, better yet, a North-South Peace Treaty co-signed by Washington and Beijing (the other primary combatants during the 1950-53 War) and endorsed by Moscow and Tokyo - should be the long-term goal of the current process.

The first step in this process, however, must be a complete, verifiable, irreversible end to Pyongyang's nuclear weapons programs. This can only occur if North Korea stops digging deeper holes and realizes that its long-term security - if not the current regime's very survival - rests upon its willingness to give up its nuclear aspirations in return for the multilateral security guarantees that remain there for the asking.