



Pyongyang Raises the Stakes by Ralph A. Cossa

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice's initial response to Pyongyang's surprise announcement that it felt "compelled to suspend our participation in the [six-party] talks" and that it had "manufactured nukes" was exactly right. "I think we just have to first look at the statement and then we need to talk with our allies," Rice said, constructively adding that the North Koreans "have been told they can have multilateral security assurances if they will make the important decision to give up their nuclear weapons program. So there is really no reason for this, but we will examine where we go next." Wherever we go next, it should be in lock step with our allies, and especially with South Korea; unilateral, contradictory responses will only play into Pyongyang's hands. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to disregard this latest pronouncement as mere rhetoric. Pyongyang has taken a significant step out of the nuclear closet and the other members of the Six-Party Talks should jointly respond. This incident also provides an opportunity for ROK leadership, if Seoul is up to the task.

The authoritative North Korean Foreign Ministry statement seems pretty clear. Pyongyang is "suspending its participation" in the talks (as opposed to quitting them) "for an indefinite period" due to Washington's continued "hostile policy," most recently evidenced by Secretary Rice's reference to North Korea as an "outpost of tyranny" during her confirmation hearings. Had Pyongyang's pronouncement ended there, it would have likely been interpreted as a tactical move to increase the North's bargaining position in order to reap more "rewards" (read: bribes) merely for showing up at the talks at some later date.

But, Pyongyang decided to increase the stakes this time by also announcing that Washington's "nuclear stick" compelled the North "to take a measure to bolster its nuclear weapons arsenal." While the North has made reference to its "powerful deterrence force" before and at one point claimed that it had "weaponized" its reprocessed plutonium, this time it was much more explicit: "We had already taken the resolute action of pulling out of the NPT and have manufactured nukes for self-defense to cope with the Bush administration's undisguised policy to isolate and stifle the DPRK."

This sounds to me like an unambiguous declaration by North Korea that it is a nuclear weapons state. Those still in denial may argue that Pyongyang is bluffing; that there is no more reason to believe Pyongyang's claim of possessing nuclear weapons than there is to believe previous assertions that it did not have them. But it seems foolish, and foolhardy, to ignore the intended message.

Secretary Rice is right to consult "the allies." The question is, what are they prepared to say and do? Most eyes have shifted toward Beijing, which has acted as an "honest broker" for the six-way dialogue. The PRC has continually urged

patience while openly questioning Washington's assertions about Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities and intentions. The diplomatic prowess of President Hu Jintao and China's "fourth generation" leadership will now be put to its most severe test. While Beijing continues to argue that it has no control over its erstwhile neighbor, its political and economic leverage over Pyongyang clearly exceeds Washington's.

But the country with the greatest degree of (largely unused and untested) leverage over North Korea is not the U.S. or China, but South Korea. To give credit where credit is due, this is largely a result of former President Kim Dae-jung's "Sunshine Policy" of economic engagement with the North (maintained through the current administration's "Policy of Peace and Prosperity"). Since the historic 2000 North-South summit, North Korea has become increasingly dependent on Seoul economically, while its (increasingly tentative) political acceptability internationally also has its roots in Seoul's continued encouragement to others to likewise engage the North. One wonders if ROK President Roh Moo-hyun is prepared to use this leverage or if it is Seoul, not Pyongyang, that has been bluffing.

President Roh has consistently argued, since his inauguration, that the ROK "would not tolerate" nuclear weapons in the North. Pyongyang, Roh asserted, could either go down the path of political and economic cooperation with the South and reap the considerable rewards inherent in this choice or it could choose to pursue nuclear weapons and face political and economic isolation from Seoul and the rest of the international community. It was an "either-or" choice; North Korea could not have it both ways . . . or can it? However else you choose to interpret the North's latest statement, it clearly is calling Seoul's hand on this issue.

If President Roh is serious about not tolerating a nuclear North Korea, at an absolute minimum he should immediately announce that South Korea is "suspending its participation" in all economic cooperation and assistance programs with North Korea, including in their joint development zone, until Pyongyang has provided a satisfactory explanation to Seoul, and to the other dialogue partners, regarding its declared nuclear capabilities and intentions. Others (especially in Washington and Tokyo) are likely to call for more drastic measures, including immediate economic sanctions against the North, but this could be a step too far (at least initially). It also puts others in the driver's seat that President Roh has long aspired to occupy. The other six-party participants should support this action and announce that they are taking (or at least considering) similar steps. But the measure will be most meaningful (and can only truly be effective) if it is initiated by Seoul.

The next step would be for Beijing, ideally at Seoul's request, to call an emergency plenary session of the Six-Party

Talks, inviting Pyongyang to attend and provide further explanation of its current stance, but making it clear that the meeting will proceed regardless of whether or not the North participates.

North Korea has effectively played a “divide and conquer” game throughout the nuclear stand-off. If it receives conflicting signals from Washington, Seoul, Beijing, Tokyo, and Moscow in the face of this latest provocation, it will be encouraged to continue this tactic. The time has come for the other five finally to begin speaking with one voice to Pyongyang, to hold it accountable for its own words and actions. If this problem cannot be handled within the six-party context, then the only alternatives are collective action through the United Nations Security Council – the desired alternative but one that Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow previously believed to be “premature” – or unilateral actions that will likely only make matters worse.

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