



## **North Korea: Cost-Benefit Analysis** by Ralph A. Cossa

ROK President Roh Moo-hyun meets later this week in Washington with U.S. President George W. Bush to attempt, once again, to carve out a common position in dealing with North Korea's nuclear weapons aspirations. Roh will be urging "sweeter carrots," while Bush will be calling for "stronger sticks." They are both right!

The two leaders share a common objective: both want to persuade North Korea not only to come back to the six-party negotiating table but also to agree to give up its nuclear weapons programs. This will require both sweeter carrots and stronger sticks. In order to get Pyongyang to seriously negotiate, it must be convinced that the benefits of cooperating outweigh the benefits of not cooperating and that the costs of not cooperating outweigh the costs of cooperating.

Washington and Seoul both seem to agree that rewards are in order if Pyongyang cooperates. Their main difference is in the timing. Seoul is prepared to give rewards up front while Washington objects to payments in advance, given Pyongyang's previous track record. But both agree that there is and should be a considerable pot of gold at the end of the diplomatic rainbow – in the form of economic benefits and security guarantees – if and when North Korea starts irreversibly down the path of nuclear disarmament.

Less recognized is the benefit Pyongyang sees in not cooperating. To date, North Korea's stonewalling has created problems not between Seoul and Pyongyang but between Washington and Seoul, with South Korea continually calling for increased U.S. "flexibility" and understanding, while generally resisting direct criticism of North Korea's actions. This double standard reinforces the public view, repeatedly articulated by professors and students alike during my recent lectures on campuses in five different South Korean cities, that the breakdown in negotiations was primarily (if not exclusively) the Bush administration's fault, despite the fact that it is Pyongyang and not Washington that refuses to return to the negotiating table.

A side benefit, again from Pyongyang's perspective, has been the recent increase in sniping and bickering between Washington and Beijing, as the Bush administration continually demands that China do more to bring the North to the table while China, in an alleged effort to maintain its "honest broker" status, refrains from exerting public pressure on Pyongyang, while having no difficulty in (accurately) citing Washington's harsh rhetoric as contributing to the problem. North Korea has survived for decades by successfully playing its neighbors against one another and seems to be doing it yet again.

As long as its refusal to negotiate continues to drive a wedge between Washington and Seoul/Beijing, it is in the

North's benefit not to cooperate. This is why it is essential that Presidents Roh and Bush reach a common understanding regarding how to proceed . . . and it is equally essential that President Roh or subsequent spokesmen (particularly from the Unification Ministry) do not immediately contradict or water down whatever agreement comes out of Washington. The continued failure of Washington and Seoul (and Beijing) to speak with one voice in dealing with the North adds immeasurably to the benefits Pyongyang sees in not cooperating.

The perceived cost associated with cooperating also needs to be lowered for the North. Giving up its nuclear card deprives Pyongyang of its primary (perhaps only) bargaining chip – it will not do so without credible security assurances, including a U.S. commitment not to pursue regime change, since regime (read: personal) survival remains North Korean leader Kim Jong-il's number one priority.

This leaves us with the area of greatest disagreement between Washington and Seoul: identifying and articulating the costs of not cooperating. One can argue that not getting the promised pot of gold is cost enough, but it is clear that this has not been sufficient to draw North Korea back to the table, especially since many of the benefits that it enjoyed prior to walking away from negotiations have been sustained (and arguably even increased) despite a year of stonewalling and unilateral escalation of the crisis.

President Roh, during his 2002 inaugural address, warned Pyongyang that it had to choose: it could either have the political and economic benefits that choosing the path of cooperation would bring or it could choose to pursue nuclear weapons and become isolated and cut-off from the international community. On Feb 10, 2005, North Korea announced its choice: it declared itself a nuclear weapons state and demanded that it be treated as such. The response, from Seoul (and from the rest of the international community) has been resounding silence; it remains business as usual.

In short, there have been little if any costs associated with North Korea's decision to walk away from the Six-Party Talks or its even more egregious nuclear weapons declaration. While Mohammed ElBaradei, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency, has identified North Korea's nuclear declaration as a single greatest threat to the international nuclear non-proliferation regime. Seoul (with China's support and threatened veto) has prevented the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) from even discussing this situation.

In the lead-up to the Bush-Roh summit, administration spokesmen have made it clear that Washington believes that the next step must be UNSC action if the North continues to refuse to return to negotiations without preconditions. Given the alternatives – acceptance of North Korea as a nuclear weapons state or unilateral U.S. military action being the most

stark at either end of the spectrum – the time has come for President Roh to acknowledge that turning to the UN is, in fact, a continuation of the diplomatic solution to which both he and President Bush aspire.

Sweeter carrots, by themselves, are not likely to persuade Pyongyang to return to the negotiating table, not when the benefits of not cooperating remain high and the costs of not cooperating remain so low. If the two presidents can agree both on sweeter carrots and stronger sticks, Pyongyang may finally conclude that it has more to gain from cooperating than from not cooperating . . . and something to lose if it continues to defy international norms of behavior.

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