



Mounting Tensions in Northeast Asia: what are the deeper causes? by James A. Kelly

[Editor's note: the following article provides an American perspective on the Six-Party Talks and the broader Korean Peninsula nuclear issue. For a North Korean perspective, see PacNet 23A.]

There is no country in Asia, indeed in the world, that behaves like the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Since its founding more than a half century ago, the DPRK has pursued a different course, always troubling. For 13-15 years it has been the very center of Northeast Asian tensions.

This path has been one of uninterrupted hardship for most of North Korea's people, with an exceptional loss of life to starvation. Now, as several times before, nuclear weapons are at the center of these tensions. No one knows how this situation will play out and there are serious dangers.

But these tensions can be eased at any time. DPRK sovereignty is recognized and if it turns not just part way, but completely and transparently from its nuclear weapons policy it can have solid security assurances. Indeed, many countries would hasten to provide aid and support to the DPRK's participation in the global system.

So far, the DPRK chooses not to ease these tensions. It will negotiate but apparently only about negotiations not about the central issue that would diminish tensions. Why does a country seem to seek tension? It has been made clear to the DPRK in and out of the Six-Party Talks that U.S. security assurances, guaranteed in a multilateral process, are available to it if it verifiably ends all segments of its nuclear weapons programs. Since 2003, the DPRK has said little about desiring security assurances. Its leadership may believe that threats and tensions serve its needs better than guarantees of security and a peaceful atmosphere.

The only way to look at the present situation is to look carefully at history. From that examination nations can devise essentially peaceful policies that, although necessarily uncertain, promise to offer the best chance of resolution.

History

The DPRK leadership decades ago set out on a path that would allow it to acquire nuclear weapons. Recently released Soviet-era documents show attempts as early as 1963 to obtain nuclear materials.

North Korea began construction of its 5-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon in 1979. Under international pressure, it joined the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty in 1985, but did not sign its comprehensive safeguards agreement with the IAEA until 1992. Within months, the IAEA found evidence of inconsistencies in North Korea's declarations with respect to

its nuclear program. We now know that plutonium in quantity sufficient for one or two nuclear weapons had been reprocessed before 1992. This provided the first part of the nuclear weapons program that the DPRK will someday have to choose to end.

By 1993, IAEA requests for additional inspections which were denied led North Korea to announce its intention to withdraw from the NPT. As tensions mounted, the U.S. and North Korea began talks that culminated in the Agreed Framework of 1994. That agreement obligated the DPRK not to produce fissile material at its declared nuclear facilities at Yongbyon. It froze, under supervision by IAEA inspectors, some 8,000 spent fuel rods that could have been reprocessed into plutonium. The agreement's goal, as stated in its preface, was an overall resolution of the nuclear issue on the Korean Peninsula. In return, the United States offered deliveries of heavy fuel and a consortium funded largely by South Korea and Japan began construction on two reactors optimized for power generation. The absence of direct South Korean participation in the Agreed Framework negotiations, a matter of vital concern for all Koreans, obviously offended many.

Both the provision of heavy fuel and the new reactors compensated for a myth, that North Korea's Yongbyon reactor was for power generation. In fact, the reactor produces very little power other than to sustain itself, but is optimized to produce sources of fissionable material. The Agreed Framework, by no means wrongly given the situation of 1994, was a freeze in exchange for a reward.

That agreement did not, as we learned later, end the North Korean nuclear arms programs. By the summer of 2002, American intelligence, with unusual unanimity, assessed that North Korea was pursuing a large-scale covert program to produce enriched uranium – in violation of the Agreed Framework, the North-South Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and the DPRK's Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA. In fact, North Korea had been pursuing the enrichment program for a number of years, even as it was receiving a pledge of non-hostility and negotiating with senior Clinton administration officials about ballistic missiles.

In October 2002, this writer led a delegation to Pyongyang to confront the North Koreans with our assessment that they had a uranium enrichment program. DPRK First Vice Foreign Minister Kang Sok Ju told us that the hostile policy of the U.S. administration had left North Korea with no choice but to pursue such a program. When we pointed out that North Korea had been pursuing such a program long before President Bush's election, he had no response.

Once caught in violation of their international obligations, instead of ending their covert uranium enrichment program, the North Koreans escalated the situation after compensating

heavy fuel deliveries stopped. In December 2002, they expelled IAEA inspectors and began to reactivate the 5-megawatt reactor at Yongbyon. In January 2003, the DPRK announced its withdrawal from the NPT. And on several occasions in 2003, it declared it had finished reprocessing its 8,000-plus existing spent fuel rods. If that is indeed the case, it could have produced enough fissile material for several additional nuclear weapons. Since then, the DPRK has stated it is strengthening what it calls its “nuclear deterrent capability.”

The DPRK nuclear weapons program has three parts by my assessment. One is the original (1990) plutonium, the second part is whatever plutonium has been reprocessed since 2003, and the third consists of fissionable material that the covert uranium enrichment effort has or will produce.

The U.S. has adhered to two basic principles to deal with this threat. First, we seek the dismantlement of all DPRK nuclear programs in a permanent, thorough, and transparent manner, subject to international verification. There is risk in all DPRK nuclear weapons programs and no point in accepting another partial solution that does not deal with the entirety of the problem. The U.S. does not intend to allow North Korea to threaten anyone further with a revival of its nuclear program.

Second, because the North’s nuclear programs threaten its neighbors and the integrity of the global nuclear non-proliferation regime, we believe the threat can best be dealt with through multilateral diplomacy. Each of the other four parties is in communication with the DPRK and has a crucial interest in a peaceful outcome.

The threat raised by North Korea and the nuclear weapons it very likely possesses is a chronic problem. North Korea has had at least 14 years to work with plutonium and to make a weapon, even before the newer efforts. It has hard workers, smart, and well educated. Logic alone says the North could have weapons – you don’t need particular intelligence. It was reported that Pakistani A.Q. Khan has said that he was taken to a cave and shown three nuclear weapons ready to fit on a missile. Eight or 10 times the North has said that it has such weapons, and it has certainly worked hard to that end.

But multilateral negotiations have been and remain the best option. After a round of trilateral discussions in April 2003 in Beijing, we held the first round of Six-Party Talks, with China as host, in August 2003. The other five parties all told North Korea very clearly in plenary session that they will not accept North Korea’s possessing nuclear arms. And all including the DPRK have agreed to the goal of a nuclear weapons-free Korean Peninsula.

The second round of Six-Party Talks was in February 2004. The parties agreed to regularize the talks, and to establish a working group to set issues up for resolution at the plenary meetings. At the second round of talks, the ROK offered fuel aid to the DPRK, if there were a comprehensive and verifiable halt of its nuclear programs as a first step toward complete nuclear dismantlement.

The third round of talks, held in June in Beijing, brought proposals yet to be explored by the U.S., ROK, and DPRK.

The U.S. met directly with all of the parties including the DPRK over the course of the talks, as it had before. In June, the U.S. held a two-and-a-half-hour discussion with the DPRK delegation.

The U.S. and ROK during the third round tabled concrete, detailed proposals to achieve a denuclearized Korean Peninsula.

The DPRK also participated actively in the plenary discussion, offering a proposal for what it described as the first step toward full denuclearization: a freeze of undefined nuclear-weapons related programs in exchange for compensation from the other parties.

Despite the agreement of all six parties in June to resume talks by end-September with a working group in the interim, and the willingness of five parties to hold to that commitment, the DPRK has not yet agreed to return to the table. It has used various pretexts to avoid responding to either the South Korean or U.S. proposals made then. It has sought to shift the discussion to what, if anything, might induce it to rejoin the talks. For a time, it said it wanted to wait for the U.S. election. When that was concluded, the DPRK declared they had to hear what the president would say at his inaugural and State of the Union addresses. More recently, an old saw, “hostile policies” has been the alleged cause. What has been going on recently, sadly, is about negotiating trivialities, not about resolving critical issues.

Current Situation

North Korea’s rhetoric notwithstanding, the U.S. leadership has said repeatedly that it has no intention of attacking or invading the DPRK, and that the U.S. has no hostile intent towards the DPRK. If the DPRK is prepared to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions, the U.S. remains ready, as we sought to convey in the third round of the Six-Party Talks in June, to coexist with the DPRK and to work in the context of the Talks to resolve the full range of issues of concern.

Diplomatic contacts among the six parties have never stopped. The U.S. has repeatedly made clear that it is ready to resume the talks, without preconditions. The U.S., now under delegation leader Assistant Secretary Chris Hill, also met often with partners in the talks in Seoul, Tokyo, Beijing, and elsewhere. All five parties agree that the Six-Party Talks is the way forward to deal with the threat of North Korea’s nuclear programs, and to improve the lives of the North Korean people and bring the DPRK into the international community.

My hope is that the serious and extensive discussions with the United States, the Republic of Korea, Japan, China, and Russia will convince the DPRK that a truly denuclearized Korean Peninsula is its only viable option, and also its most favorable choice. Then, perhaps, North Korea will come to understand that all this delay is not in its interest.

The DPRK may be seeking a kind of respect by possessing nuclear weapons that it may assess cannot be obtained any other way. The example of India and Pakistan, and a de facto acceptance of its nuclear power status may be the goal. Indeed, recent DPRK statements support this. But

India and Pakistan are large countries, with particular security concerns, and neither had ever joined the NPT. The parallel is not apt.

Objectively, despite the cries heard from DPRK organs, there is and has been little or no military threat to the regime. Its concern is, I believe, primarily internal and not external. It was in the late 1990s, at a time of low tension, that the DPRK declared its Military First or *songun* policy. No country can achieve economic viability with a prohibitively costly Military First policy. Worse, to sustain such a policy, it is essential to posit unending threats and to maintain a state of internal fear and tension. These tensions, by my reading, are deemed necessary to justify the unending hardships that are the lot of most North Korean people.

Against the backdrop of the Six-Party Talks, the DPRK appears to be trying to undertake some measures in response to its disastrous economy. Its wage and price reforms are an important first step but have created inflation and other economic and social problems. Ultimately, then, it is too soon to evaluate the overall nature or long-term impact of these steps, but we encourage Pyongyang to move in this direction and hope these measures will serve as a foundation upon which to build improved economic relations with other countries in the future. By addressing the world's concerns about its nuclear programs and other issues, the DPRK would have both new resources and opportunities to pursue policies for peaceful growth in the region that is already perhaps the world's most vibrant, East Asia.

Conclusion

The Six Party Talks are an appropriate venue – involving each national player with essential interests – but North Korea has been working on nuclear weapons for very many years and it is not about to easily give them up. Pyongyang is certainly willing to make a deal, but I fear it wants an arrangement that guarantees what it sees as its security, avoids any issues like human rights, pays generously, and only requires it to give up a portion of its nuclear weapons capabilities. Solving this problem is going to be a long and difficult process. Delay involves risks. The possibility that the DPRK might sell weapons or other fissile material to any buyer, although most recently it says that it would not, is a potential nightmare. Yet, various ideas for a “quick” solution are unattractive. Patient, but persistent, diplomacy is needed.

Resolution is not impossible. While there have been some economic reforms, North Korea still requires certain resources from the outside – food, fuel, and cash. Its illicit attempts to seek such resources offer vulnerabilities. Cooperative measures against illicit drug and counterfeit efforts and diminished missile sales have hurt cash flow to the North. The prolonged opposition of Japan and the U.S., and the careful attitude of the ROK put a certain amount of pressure on NK. But is it enough?

I must stress that the door remains open for the DPRK, by addressing the concerns of the international community, to vastly improve the lives of its people, enhance its own security, normalize its relations with the U.S. and others, and raise its stature in the world. The United States, working with others, remains committed to resolving the nuclear issue

through peaceful diplomatic means. Looking at what has been achieved in the Six-Party Talks thus far, all of the elements of a resolution are clearly within sight. The only thing that is missing is a strategic decision by Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons ambitions and to negotiate in earnest.

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