



North Korea: Assessing Blame; Examining Motives!

By Ralph A. Cossa

“It’s all Bush’s fault!” “No, it’s all Clinton’s fault!” Has anyone engaged in this increasingly counterproductive debate over who should be blamed for North Korea’s nuclear test stopped to consider that it might actually be Kim Jong-il’s fault . . . and that the North Korean “Dear Leader” is sitting back laughing at the internecine warfare that currently passes for a foreign policy debate in the U.S.?

Clinton did all he could and enjoyed some success; the Agreed Framework did freeze Pyongyang’s known plutonium assets for a significant period of time. Otherwise, North Korea could have stockpiled perhaps 10 times as much plutonium as it is currently believed to possess. The evidence is also overwhelming, however, that North Korea was already exploring a uranium-based nuclear option, even while entertaining then-U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright or greeting then-ROK President Kim Dae-jung with streets lined with pom-pom girls during their historic 2000 visits to Pyongyang.

Bush was also right in approaching the problem multilaterally; the Six-Party Talks put the party with the greatest stakes – Seoul – firmly at the table (righting an Agreed Framework wrong). Bilateral talks between Washington and Pyongyang would have cut Seoul out of the process (at a time newly elected ROK President Roh Moo-hyun was demanding a “leading role” in security-related affairs). It would have also facilitated Pyongyang’s “divide-and-conquer” approach, aimed at driving wedges between the other players by making different promises (or threats) to each.

Today, many call on Washington to engage Pyongyang directly. This overlooks the fact that the Bush administration has already agreed to bilateral discussions, as long as they are conducted “in the context of the six-party process.” It has also increasingly broadened the definition of “in the context,” stating that “it doesn’t mean in the room, it doesn’t mean in the building, it just means in the context.” All Pyongyang needs to do to get a bilateral meeting is to promise to return to the Six-Party Talks without preconditions, something the entire international community (not to mention two UN Security Council resolutions) has urged it repeatedly to do. As Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill has promised, “when they are back in the diplomatic game, if they are prepared to be a member of the Six-Party Talks, we’re prepared to have as many bilateral meetings as they can stand.”

It has been Pyongyang that has consistently refused to meet with the U.S., either bilaterally or multilaterally, until Washington ends its “hostile attitude.” The “proof” demanded by Pyongyang that this has been done has varied, ranging from lifting all financial sanctions (its current demand) to

completing the light-water reactor project promised under the Agreed Framework (which first required North Korea to come into full compliance with International Atomic Energy Agency safeguards agreements), to a bilateral peace treaty and withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the Peninsula, always with payment in advance.

In monitoring Pyongyang’s behavior, it is hard to escape the conclusion that Dear Leader Kim is convinced that having nuclear weapons is essential to his survival and that the benefits to be gained outweigh current (or anticipated) consequences.

There are at least four main reasons why North Korea seems intent on pursuing nuclear weapons. Two predate the Bush administration. One was the failure of the international community – despite the initial efforts of the Clinton administration (and Tokyo) – to effectively respond to the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests. Almost without exception, every conversation I have had with colleagues from North Korea regarding nuclear weapons includes some reference to Pakistan and how its “international status” was elevated once it became a self-declared nuclear weapons state.

Before this, Pyongyang witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union and the transformation of China, accompanied by caveats from both Moscow and Beijing as to the extent of their “Friendship” treaties with Pyongyang assured the North of military support in the event of a crisis on the Peninsula. The loss of these allies was sobering, as was the collapse, like a string of dominos, of all its East European allies. Combine this with Pyongyang’s natural *juche* (self-reliance) tendencies, and another clear motivation emerges.

Bush’s 2002 ill-conceived “axis of evil” speech (which was more a sales pitch for missile defense than it was a foreign policy statement) didn’t help. Nor did the even more ill-conceived invasion and subsequent quagmire in Iraq. While fear of invasion may have accelerated an already existing uranium-based weapons program three years ago, today it’s the lack of fear of attack (rather than the imaginary but frequently cited “U.S. preemptive nuclear attack strategy”) that has emboldened Pyongyang.

Marching on Pyongyang, even in the best of times, would have been difficult and extremely risky; today it is virtually impossible, given the number of U.S. forces committed to Iraq and Afghanistan and the realization that Seoul would not permit its territory to be used as a staging base. Kim Jong-il reportedly went into hiding for several months when Baghdad rapidly fell; he sees little need to duck for cover these days.

This leads to another primary motivating factor: the lack of serious or sustained consequences. The nuclear test was not the first affront to the international nonproliferation regime, only the latest. Pyongyang has been a self-declared nuclear weapons state since February 2005. Then, as now, South Korea and China, among others, asserted that a nuclear North Korea would not be tolerated: South Korean President Roh

asserted that it would not be “business as usual” until Pyongyang gave up its nuclear ambitions. He was true to his word. It’s actually been “business better than ever.”

According to the ROK Ministry of Unification, North-South trade increased by 50 percent last year, to just over \$1 billion annually. South Korea is the North’s second largest trading partner, accounting for 26 percent of Pyongyang’s annual trade (behind China’s 39 percent). Meanwhile, hard currency continues to flow into the North via the South’s Kumgang tourism project and the Kaesong Industrial Zone, despite the UNSC sanctions – South Korea is currently studying the issue to see if UNSCR 1718 applies to these efforts, seemingly forgetting that the resolution describes the minimum steps required; it does not preclude taking even tougher measures, as Japan and Australia have already done.

Seoul and Beijing have argued that the sanctions should not be too vigorously applied: “punishment isn’t the goal [of the sanctions]” a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman explained. Perhaps not; but certainly business as usual (or better than ever) was not what the other members of the UNSC had in mind when they unanimously passed UNSCR 1718.

With the Oct. 9 nuclear test (and with more possibly to follow), we have run out of good options in dealing with this problem. Some have suggested a special envoy, like the Jimmy Carter mission in June 1994 that helped to defuse the earlier nuclear crisis and opened the door for the October 1994 Agreed Framework.

It is useful to recall, however, that Jimmy Carter’s mission to Pyongyang was not at the request of the Clinton administration; they tried to dissuade him from going, even though he ended up saving the day. Perhaps it’s time for Papa Bush to announce a similar desire to travel (or fish for an invitation from Pyongyang), to bail out Junior.

Special envoy or not, it is doubtful Kim Jong-il will pay attention to serious new proposals, or honor any that he might eventually sign, until he is convinced that pursuing nuclear weapons decreases rather than increases the prospects for regime survival. Business as usual or better than ever is not going to bring this about.

In the absence of good options, I remain convinced that the “least worst” option is to pursue a clearly defined, credible, sustained containment policy aimed at ensuring that whatever nuclear capability exists in North Korea remains in North Korea, while exerting firm pressure on Pyongyang, to bring about either a change of heart or a change of regime from within. A round of Six-Minus-One-Party Talks should be called now to start defining and implementing this policy.

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