



Hear We Go Again - North Korea and Nuclear Weapons by Michael McDevitt

I have been following the saga of North Korea and nuclear weapons since 1990. It has been a roller coaster-like experience as the issue rises and falls, alternating between extreme concern and apparent relief that "finally" we have an agreement that will once and for all resolve the issue. First, North Korea agreed to join the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT). In early 1992 following U.S. withdrawal of tactical nuclear weapons from South Korea, it signed an agreement with the South to maintain a nonnuclear weapons peninsula. Finally, in 1994 there was the Agreed Framework. In each case, North Korea agreed to not develop nuclear weapons, and in each instance, another agreement was necessary because Pyongyang was not willing to abide by the previous agreement.

Here we go again! Pyongyang's acknowledgement that, yes, we are working on a nuclear weapons program and, yes, we have an even more terrible weapon than an enriched uranium bomb is like *deja vu*. The current situation is almost an instant replay of 1993-94 when Pyongyang announced it was going to leave the NPT, and, oh, by the way, if the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and the United States pressed for sanctions in the United Nations, Pyongyang would consider it an act of war.

In retrospect this was tried and true North Korean negotiating behavior. Having established negotiating "leverage" by threatening to do something bad, they promptly sat back and watched the world beg them not to do bad things. Apparently having been confronted with U.S. evidence that they were doing something bad, Pyongyang has apparently decided to revert to form, and this time instead of being coy have admitted they are doing, and will continue to do, something bad. (You grudgingly have to admire their *chutzpah*.) Based on past behavior they appear to be waiting for everyone to beat a path to their door to try and talk them out of nukes. This, I hasten to add, is not necessarily a bad thing.

It seems to me that what they have done is effectively put their nuclear program on the table to determine what they can trade it for. This could be a good thing, especially since there are not too many other plausible alternatives. North Korea also gains the added benefit in this ploy of improving its deterrence posture against any U.S. attempt to take military action against the country - something Pyongyang probably is not willing to totally rule out despite President George W. Bush's statements in South Korea earlier this year about not attacking the North.

This is kind of an extra insurance policy, or inoculation against the "preemption" doctrine. While it is unlikely that South Korea would have ever acquiesced in any "preemptive" U.S. military action against the North, this declaration makes it even more likely that Seoul would never agree to such a course of action. (It is not lost on South Korea that North Korea's ability to

deliver nuclear weapons off the Peninsula is still very limited, if it exists at all. This is not true if the target is in South Korea.) This admission also dampens any enthusiasm a more conservative future ROK administration might have for exploring attack options. Pyongyang seems to have also let the air out of the administration's "comprehensive" approach to dealing with North Korea in which conventional force posture, ballistic missiles, and weapons of mass destruction are deemed to all be of equal importance. By playing the nuclear card, they have focused attention on what matters most, changed the "discussion," and made nuclear weapons the priority.

While no one can pretend to know what calculations led Pyongyang to come clean about its nuclear weapons program, this does seem to be a rational course of action given the assumptions that Beijing is not going to abandon them, that Seoul is not going to permit an attack against them, and that the Japanese want to bargain. Pyongyang may figure that Japanese Prime Minister Koizumi Junichiro would like nothing better for his political standing at home than to be the one who solves this problem.

What should the U.S. do? Exactly what it has done so far - speak very softly, consult with China and regional allies, and over time find out if it is possible to get North Korea to verifiably denuclearize. In the meantime the Agreed Framework goes into the dead letter file.

As always with North Korea there are only three potential courses of action: (1) resort to military action, (2) ignore them, refusing to be blackmailed into paying them to stop doing bad things, or (3) negotiate in the hope of reaching verifiable outcomes that stem nuclear proliferation and long-range missile developments. So far, it seems that a combination of two and three is the approach the administration has taken.

Of course - Pyongyang is just as liable to say, "Sorry, we were just kidding . . ."

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