



North Korea: Now What?

by Alan D. Romberg

Lawyers have a maxim: never ask a question to which you don't know the answer. Perhaps the diplomatic counterpart is never make a demand if you aren't prepared for the response. The Bush administration might have felt it had the answer to whether North Korea had a clandestine uranium enrichment program to obtain fissile material, but it appears not to have developed a position about what to do if the North owned up to that fact but failed to repent. Now that Pyongyang has done just that - and said the 1994 Agreed Framework that constrained its known nuclear program is nullified - Washington is scrambling to figure out how to respond.

The first task, already under way, is to consult with our "coordination" partners, South Korea and Japan. The U.S. had made clear that substantial progress in normalizing Korean and especially Japanese relations with the DPRK must not occur until the nuclear program is appropriately dealt with. This will run smack up against the views of many in Seoul and Tokyo; both share concern over the most recent developments, but also have recently seen some rare openings in their own dealings with the North and believe that engagement is a surer path to peace and progress than confrontation. They will be torn between the imperative of maintaining alliance unity and their fear that the U.S. is leading them unnecessarily down a path that could not only stymie their own efforts but even end up in conflict.

President George W. Bush clearly does not want a military confrontation with North Korea as he contemplates war with Iraq. Administration's statements have stressed the desire for a peaceful resolution. But while the North's recent penchant for true confessions with Japan (over Japanese abductees and DPRK military/spy boats in Japanese waters) is refreshing, the accompanying apologies and promises against repetition in those cases seem not to apply to the nuclear program. This doesn't mean that a negotiated outcome is impossible. Indeed, the North's approach is most explicable in terms of a bid for negotiations. This is understandable in light of the DPRK's priorities to ensure its own security as it struggles to rescue its failing economy. But mutual suspicions and hostility are very high between Pyongyang and Washington; neither is inclined to make preemptive compromises in the face of what it sees as a blatant challenge.

China's role will be very important. Beijing's stand against nuclear weapons on the Peninsula and in favor of cooperative relations among all interested parties is consistent with our own. But China doesn't like to be seen as pressuring its close neighbor, from whom it just received a high-level delegation in notably comradely fashion. This, however, is not a time for China to equivocate. On other issues of importance to the U.S. ranging from Taiwan to nonproliferation and even Iraq, Beijing has seen its interest in not confronting Washington. North Korea rises to the same level of importance and will be a front-burner issue at

the Oct. 25 Crawford summit. China's interest, and responsibility, is to find a way to help resolve this common problem.

Washington, too, has a major responsibility not just to address the nuclear problem, but to do so in a manner that serves the interests of peace and stability in East Asia. That doesn't mean ducking-North Korea should be made to live up to its NPT obligations-but it means staying in harness with our allies, who have a parallel but not identical set of concerns and interests, and without whom no satisfactory solution will be possible. And that means being willing to engage in dialogue with the North, something it says will only be possible if the North first-unilaterally, visibly, and verifiably-dismantles its uranium enrichment program.

The North has been desperately trying to get the Bush administration's attention and empathy. Having not only openly declared its nuclear program but raised questions about the status of the Agreed Framework it now has the former, though hardly the latter. (It is worth noting that a subsequent North Korean broadcast described the Agreed Framework as at a crossroads where its continued validity was in the balance. This suggests that the U.S. may have taken a typically belligerent North Korean statement-e.g. "because of all the bad things you have done the Agreed Framework is nullified"-and misconstrued it as a "declaration of nullification" that was not intended.)

Surely dismantlement must take place, but the current U.S. approach is not well-designed to achieve that. Washington seems to take on faith that a stiff position, backed up by Seoul, Tokyo and perhaps Beijing and Moscow, will be enough to force Pyongyang to do the necessary. Maybe that approach will succeed. More likely, Pyongyang will react to any coordinated pressure by taking yet another step to underscore that it, too, has needs, but if those needs can be addressed, then the bazaar is open on the weapons program-indeed on all security issues of concern to the U.S. Citing the prospect of concerted pressure, Pyongyang issued a warning on October 22 that "If the U.S. persists in its moves to apply pressure and stifle the DPRK by force, the latter will have no option but to take tougher counteraction." Overblown rhetoric is a Northern specialty, but, given the current context, this should not necessarily be taken as an idle threat.

At this point, the task for both sides is to take the heightened tension that has been created and channel it into efforts that produce a win-win outcome. This is not impossible, but will require a level of imaginativeness, vision, and taking the other party seriously that, so far, has been lacking on all sides.

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