



Why North Korea Loves the Bomb by Robert Madsen

Viewed objectively, North Korea's decision to reactivate its nuclear weapons program does not alter the balance of power in East Asia very much. Pyongyang already has chemical and biological arms, many deployed along the South Korean border. But Kim Jong-il's gambit nevertheless poses many dangers, including the possibility of a regional arms race. To forestall these problems, the world must dissuade North Korea from its present course of action. As a first step, the United States and other countries are trying to divine what the Kim government wants in exchange for the termination of its armament program.

The problem with this analysis is that it presumes Pyongyang wants something other than the very weapons it is building - and this is far from obvious. Indeed, an examination of North Korea's national interests suggests the acquisition of a sizeable nuclear arsenal is a perfectly rational objective.

The security argument for the bomb is obvious. Although North Korea's military forces have long sufficed to deter invasion, they did not prevent the U.S. from threatening attack in 1993 and 1994, nor from forcing Pyongyang to abjure nuclear arms in the subsequent Agreed Framework. While many observers believed this agreement had resolved the weapons dispute, it now appears that Kim and his advisers concluded that their lack of nuclear bombs left them vulnerable to foreign intimidation and must therefore be obviated. History seems to have vindicated this judgment, for Pyongyang's presumptive possession of one or two nuclear devices has compelled the Bush White House to move rapidly from an obdurate to a relatively conciliatory position.

Financial exigency compels Pyongyang to seek many more such weapons. The North Korean economy has been on the brink of collapse for years, and last summer's attempt at partial reform has subsequently proved a failure. Assuming Kim realizes that revivifying his country would require comprehensive change of the sort that would imperil his regime, he has probably settled on the alternative strategy of sustaining the existing system with steady infusions of international aid.

To secure these subsidies, however, North Korea needs bargaining power. Its existing arsenal has not brought such leverage as Washington emphatically demonstrated when it decided last autumn to suspend fuel deliveries and other forms of bilateral assistance. The appeal of an active nuclear program is that it promises to provide the additional leverage Pyongyang so obviously needs. Soon the Kim government will have enough bombs either to contemplate nuclear strikes against its neighbors or to begin exporting those weapons. The

only way the outside world could prevent North Korea from engaging in this lucrative trade would be to proffer whatever economic inducements Pyongyang demands.

Nuclear armament also gives Kim the international stature he covets. Throughout the 1990s, North Korea demanded negotiations with the U.S. and only occasionally consented to interact diplomatically with the lesser East Asian states. Tokyo and Seoul, by contrast, wanted Pyongyang to deal primarily with them; and Washington usually agreed with its allies. Other than during the 1993-1994 crisis, no one thought North Korea deserved to communicate regularly and intimately with the world's only superpower.

Kim Jong-il's nuclear initiative has reversed this pattern. Pyongyang has warned repeatedly that "direct and equal negotiations" with Washington are essential if the impasse is to be overcome. Meanwhile, South Korea, Japan, China, and Russia have all urged the United States to consent to diplomatic talks with the North Koreans and, to one extent or another, are resisting the American desire to "multilateralize" the dispute. Thus deprived of any alternative, the Bush administration has reluctantly edged ever closer to a bilateral dialogue.

Given the magnitude of these gains, Kim is unlikely to forsake his present policy. He will not declare his ambitions openly, lest that galvanize other countries into more resolute action. Rather, he will endeavor to confuse the international community by calling for discussions with the United States while always finding reason to step back from exchanges that might limit Pyongyang's freedom of action. The result will be months of false starts, abortive diplomatic initiatives, and minatory fulminations, during which North Korea's nuclear development continues apace.

Once it has acquired six or seven bombs and the capacity to assemble more, Pyongyang may become more sensitive to its neighbor's concerns. Yet the focus of the diplomacy will have shifted. No longer will East Asia be seeking a reversion to the circumstances of the early 1990s - which Kim will not consider - but rather attempting to retard the speed with which North Korea builds additional weapons and distributes them abroad.

This need not spell the end of the world. Despite its reputation for unpredictability, Pyongyang has generally acted rationally in its foreign policies. This was certainly the case in 1993-1994, when the Clinton administration was so exercised, and North Korea's utilization of the Iraqi imbroglio to facilitate its nuclear effort has also been astute. This pattern of shrewd political judgment suggests that even with nuclear

weapons, North Korea would refrain from acting in ways that entailed inordinate risk of war.

On the other hand, no one would feel comfortable relying on Kim Jong-il's sense of responsibility. He could be expected to exact the highest price for any concessions - in effect, compelling the international community to preserve his regime indefinitely. Nor would this necessarily guarantee the region's peace and security, for possession of nuclear bombs might embolden Pyongyang to act more rashly than it has in the recent past. Moreover, by provoking an arms race North Korea would increase the likelihood that a misstep by some other Northeast Asian state inadvertently triggered a conflagration.

If these dangers are deemed unacceptable, then the world must persuade North Korea to desist from its efforts to obtain offensive and commercial nuclear capabilities. Talks between Pyongyang and Washington must assuredly be part of this process, but such communication would not by itself alter Kim Jong-il's strategic thinking. To achieve this effect, the United States must alter the costs and benefits that he perceives in building more bombs. This means mounting a credible threat of economic and military sanctions so that, over the next several months, North Korea decides that it must immediately desist from its current course.

In presenting such a challenge to Pyongyang a multilateral approach would doubtless be preferable to a unilateral campaign, but organizing a concerted effort in today's circumstances would be very difficult. For although Seoul and Tokyo profess eagerness to coordinate their policies with Washington, they would presumably blanch at the prospect of a military buildup; and Beijing would almost certainly resist any measures that might precipitate a refugee crisis. Overcoming this resistance would presumably require much more than the several months that are actually available. So if the United States wants to raise the stakes such that bilateral talks stand a chance of dissuading North Korea from its nuclear demarche, it must be prepared to act alone. Should the Bush administration determine that the cost of alienating its East Asian friends through assertive policy is too great, then it must reconcile itself to Pyongyang's fait accompli and learn to deal with the Kim government as a major nuclear power.

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