



Three Yardsticks for a Strategic Evaluation: Responding to a Nuclear North Korea by L. Gordon Flake

Since year's end, much of the attention on North Korea's nuclear program has focused on the missed deadlines for disabling the Yongbyon facility and more importantly for Pyongyang's provision of a "complete and correct" declaration of all its nuclear programs. However, whether a declaration is forthcoming or not, it is important to note that it has now been nearly 15 months since North Korea's Oct. 9, 2006 nuclear test and it is against this timeline that the progress in negotiations might best be evaluated.

U.S. strategy toward North Korea in the second term of the Bush administration is, at its most basic level, a rejection of the approach of the first term, during which contact with North Korea was tightly proscribed and the strategy was largely an effort to bring international pressure to bear on Pyongyang to convince it to make a "strategic" decision to abandon its nuclear ambitions before the United States would engage in any meaningful way. By contrast, the second term's approach has been to engage North Korea directly in the context of the Six-Party Talks and, through tough negotiations, lead North Korea to make a series of "tactical" decisions that, while in themselves not satisfactory, would lead North Korea closer to the "strategic" decision sought by the U.S. Over the past year, this approach has arguably convinced North Korea to return to the Six-Party Talks, shut down its reactor at Yongbyon, allow in international inspectors, and even if slightly delayed, hopefully still "disable" the Yongbyon facility and submit a declaration in the not-too-distant future.

These are all very real accomplishments and merit recognition. However, they should be evaluated in light of the strategic objective of persuading North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Accordingly, I suggest three yardsticks against which negotiations with North Korea should be measured: 1) the context of the Oct. 9, 2006 North Korean nuclear test; 2) the relative strength of regional coordination and cooperation; and 3) the proximity of results to the goal of eliminating North Korea's nuclear program.

Had the recent progress in U.S.-North Korean relations taken place prior to October 2006, there would be little but good to say about achieving the freeze of the Yongbyon facility, its possible disablement, and hoped for eventual dismantlement. The same can be said for the anticipated declaration of North Korea's nuclear program, even if it turns out to be incomplete. However, these and other steps forward in the negotiations of the past year can only be fairly evaluated in the context of North Korea's 2006 nuclear test. Has our policy been an appropriate or an adequate response to a nuclear test?

Despite North Korea being the only country in history to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and subsequently test a nuclear weapon, in the year since that test, the UN Security Council sanctions that passed with unprecedented Chinese support remain largely unimplemented. The United States supported the return of the illicit funds tied to Banco Delta Asia, and along with South Korea and China, has resumed the shipment of heavy fuel oil to the North. South Korea has resumed the shipment of fertilizer and food and, despite long-time vows to never tolerate a nuclear North Korea, held a presidential summit on Oct. 4, 2007. None of the summit's laundry list of pledges was specifically linked to or conditioned upon North Korea's abandonment of its nuclear weapons, nor did they include any consequences or price for the nuclear test.

To be fair, thus far the North Koreans have shut down the Yongbyon reactor and apparently begun the process of "disablement." However, for a state that has tested a nuclear weapon, apparently reprocessed an as yet unknown amount of plutonium into weapons-grade fissile materials, and demonstrated an unwillingness to formally refer to, let alone begin negotiations on these key elements, the international community's response hardly appears commensurate. It is hardly strange, therefore, that the Bush administration, and particularly the negotiating team, seldom mentions the North Korean nuclear test.

A second and perhaps more important measure of the past year's diplomacy is the degree of coordination and cooperation among Washington, Tokyo, Beijing, Seoul, and Moscow. The fundamental justification for the unwieldy six-party format of talks has been that the U.S. alone does not have sufficiently flexible carrots or sticks to convince North Korea to abandon its nuclear ambitions. Only by leveraging the influence of China, Japan, South Korea, and Russia is there a realistic possibility to jointly convince North Korea to make a strategic choice.

In the months immediately following the North Korean nuclear test, the U.S. enjoyed an unprecedented amount of commonality with the other four parties in response to North Korea's action. It was at least in part this common voice and approach that was responsible for the North Korean decision to return to the talks. Accordingly, our current negotiating approach should be judged by how effectively we have utilized, or perhaps how we might have squandered, this resource. The question might be simply asked: a year after the North Korean nuclear test, are the policies and approaches of the other five parties better coordinated or further apart? If they are in fact more disparate, the U.S. ability to address increasingly challenging future negotiations over fissile materials, weapons, inspections, and verification cannot but be compromised.

While the post-nuclear test consensus among the U.S., Japan, China, Korea, and Russia was by no means absolute, by any measure it has fractured since. South Korea's October summit with the North was hardly part of a coordinated approach and the resulting joint statement of aspirations appears to be largely delinked from the Six-Party Talks. At the other extreme, Japan feels betrayed, arguing that its concerns have not been adequately addressed and at present refuses to materially participate in supporting the Feb. 13 agreement.

In between these two lie Russia and China, with Russia increasingly playing a self-serving spoiler role more related to a resurgent Russian resistance to the U.S. globally than to anything relevant to Korea. The Chinese appear confused, and recent visitors to Beijing report a growing concern among Chinese officials that the U.S. has decided to live with a nuclear North Korea, at least for the time being. If anything, in recent months China, South Korea, and Japan appear somewhat united in their frustration at being kept in the dark about the real status of the highly personalized negotiations between Assistant Secretary of State Christopher Hill and North Korean Vice Foreign Minister Kim Gye-gwan. The Six-Party Talks appear increasingly to have become reduced to rubber stamping the vague agreements reached on a bilateral basis between the U.S. and North Korea.

To understand the implications of this deterioration in a regional consensus, we might postulate what would be the responses of our partners should North Korea decline to provide a "complete and correct" declaration, or, worse still, to state openly that while it is prepared to abandon the decrepit Yongbyon facility, its nuclear weapons and reprocessed fissile material are not on the table. Would China be willing to return the issue to the UN Security Council? Would it be willing to pile more sanctions on the two measures that it supported in 2006 but which remain largely unimplemented? Will South Korea, even under the leadership of President-elect Lee Myung-bak, be willing to relink its economic relationship with the North to the nuclear issue?

A third yardstick by which current progress must be measured is the proximity to the goal of complete denuclearization. Here it is essential to recognize that there is not a unitary scenario or objective. As much as the U.S. might want North Korea to make a "Libya style" decision to actively cooperate in the elimination of not only its nuclear program but also the materials and weapons produced by that program, there is the strong likelihood that Pyongyang has a very different model in mind: India. The North Korean presumption, no longer outlandish, may be that if, like India, it can ride out the initial harsh reaction to its nuclear test, the world will come to tolerate some ambiguity regarding its nuclear status. Here again the question is relatively simple: a year after the North Korean nuclear test and nearly a year after the resumption of the Six-Party Talks, are we closer to a Libya model or to an India model?

Even if we assume that the current phase of the negotiations is successfully implemented and the Yongbyon facility is disabled, North Korea will still have nuclear weapons and fissile material. Even if North Korea provides a complete declaration, we have yet to discuss the price for their

weapons and fissile materials, the low bid for which is certainly Light Water Nuclear Reactors, something that is politically if not legally impossible. If that is the case, have North Korea's tactical decisions made it more likely that they will abandon their nuclear ambitions or less likely that we will be able to respond to those ambitions?

While it may be tempting to think that the North Korean calculation is limited to whether they should make a deal with the Bush administration in its waning days or try its luck with a new, possibly Democratic administration, it is important to remember that North Korea may be seeking to avoid making a deal altogether and thus preserve its nuclear status.

Some may consider this strategic assessment premature, at least until we have seen the North Korean declaration on its nuclear program. However, if the North Korean declaration is less than forthcoming, the paucity of remaining options will become quickly apparent and the focus of our negotiating efforts will have to return in earnest to our friends and allies in the region.

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