

North Korea as a Nuclear Weapons State

by Michael McDevitt

Michael McDevitt (mcdevitm@cna.org) is vice president and director of the Center for Strategic Studies at CNA Corporation.

The most immediate and dangerous development in Northeast Asia today is the situation on the Korean Peninsula. Between April 5 when it launched a long-range missile and its nuclear test on May 25, North Korea has withdrawn from the Six-Party talks, effectively backing out of the September 2005 Six Party Joint Statement that included a denuclearization pledge. If nothing else, its test last week made this point clearly. It is now reportedly working to recommission the reprocessing plant at Yongbyan with the obvious intent of turning the spent fuel in the rods removed from its now idle reactor into weapons grade material – essentially making good the weapons-grade material used in the latest test, plus some.

This means that North Korea has hit the “reset” button on its nuclear program. It has turned the clock back to the winter of 2001-02 when it shed all international agreements and restraints on developing nuclear weapons. Only this time the situation is worse. During the past eight years North Korea has tested both nuclear devices and long-range missiles so it is “resetting” at a much more advanced stage. Whether the years have provided enough time for it to take the next technical step and turn its devices into a deliverable weapon is unknown. But without question Pyongyang must be working on this step: a nuclear “deterrent” is only credible if it can be delivered.

North Korea’s pattern of agreement, destabilizing activity, stage-managed outrage at being called to account, and then agreement repudiation has been played out several times since 1990. The sad reality is that over the past 29 years, five US administrations have worked unsuccessfully to keep North Korea free of nuclear weapons. This almost three-decade-long series of policy failures clearly suggests that trying to diplomatically curtail the North Korean program would never have succeeded since the North Korean regime *really* wants nuclear weapons. In turn this means only when there is a regime in Pyongyang that does not want nuclear weapons will the nations of Northeast Asia be able to emerge from the North Korean nuclear shadow.

The unhappy history of dealing with North Korea and its nuclear weapons program suggests that without regime change in Pyongyang, in attitude if not in actuality, it is only a matter of time before North Korea becomes a de facto nuclear weapon power with a missile capability that can reach South Korea, Japan and probably Hawaii. This will fundamentally change the strategic situation in Northeast Asia. The implications for stability and negative impact on U.S. strategic interests will be very serious.

It is foolish to pretend to understand Pyongyang’s long-term objectives when it comes to nuclear weapons, but it is likely that it wants to be treated like India and Pakistan: a declared nuclear weapon state existing outside the NPT. Even in the highly unlikely case that others in the region would agree to this outcome because the U.S. can still deter use and maintain escalation dominance, such a possibility is remote. Washington would almost certainly never agree as long as the prospect of a nuclear weapon falling into the hands of a terrorist organization remains a real concern.

What is to be done? U.S. policy makers have wisely shied away from attempting regime change by force of arms because of fears it would trigger a second Korean War. Clearly North Korea’s withdrawal from the six-party process has illustrated the flaw in the argument that led to the six-party process: to wit, once confronted by all of its neighbors, North Korea would not dare ignore the desires of the other five. It turns out that it can ignore them - which is the inherent weakness of any multilateral process that depends only upon cooperation without threat of punishment for a failure to do so.

Because China, whether true or not, is widely believed to have the greatest influence with Pyongyang, it seems reasonable that the other four parties look to Beijing to provide a credible path toward verifiable denuclearization of the North. That path has to be more than the typical Beijing calls for patience and engagement. It is time for that path to focus on regime change without the direct use of force. China has the economic and political leverage to accomplish this mission, but up to now every indication is that Beijing wants no part of such a strategy.

Because the Obama administration has made it clear it was willing to engage with Pyongyang, and has been rebuffed, it is reasonable to conclude that Pyongyang has decided that what the U.S. has to offer to persuade it to denuclearize is not a big-enough carrot to counterbalance giving up its nuclear program. As Beijing must surely appreciate, this means it is the only country with the ability to resolve this problem.

The next step must be a serious Sino-U.S. dialogue on the topic, one that includes a specific discussion of all options, including regime change, and explores in depth China’s legitimate concerns regarding an unstable or collapsing North Korea. The goal would be to assuage Beijing’s concerns by firm commitments of U.S., Japanese, and South Korean assistance as well as pledges regarding what action that Washington would and would not take and what actions by China it would support should the North Korea regime collapse. The goal would be to make it easier strategically for Beijing to apply serious pressure on Pyongyang – pressure that has as its objective a permanent change in regime behavior regarding nuclear weapons, and recognizing that this may only be possible with the removal of Kim Jong-il. This means

Washington will have to be willing to ameliorate Beijing's concerns regarding the strategic fallout if it uses the leverage it has.