

The Challenge of a Nuclear North Korea: Dark Clouds, Only One Silver Lining by Richard C. Bush

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A Puzzle

Why, when President Obama offered an open hand to America's adversaries in his inaugural address, did North Korea choose to respond with a clenched fist? Specifically, it tested a long-range ballistic missile in April and a nuclear device in May.

We may never know the answer, but Pyongyang's apparent failure to test the Obama administration raises questions about its fundamental intentions. The working assumption of the Six Party Talks (6PT) and of US policy was that North Korea could be induced to give up its nuclear weapons and programs in exchange for normalization of relations with the United States and Japan, economic assistance, and a security guarantee. If North Korea has no intention of denuclearizing, then US policy should change accordingly.

The transition to the Obama administration presented North Korea with a good opportunity to resume a stalled negotiating process. The most likely explanation why it did not do so is the succession issue. Kim Jong-il's August 2008 stroke forced him and the regime to contemplate what would happen when he dies.

A leadership transition is the worst context for any regime to consider its fundamental future, and the bargain the 6PT presents to the DPRK is fraught with risks. It would have to give up its most significant deterrent capability (nuclear weapons) in return for a change in the intentions of the United States and other adversaries, adversaries it does not trust. A new economic policy would likely mean opening up the country to foreign companies, aid workers, and diplomats, which in turn could disturb internal stability.

A healthy Kim Jong-il might have been prepared to consider those choices. A dying Kim could not, and neither would his key subordinates. Kim's "military first" policy, including the nuclear program, and the need to ensure the support of generals for his succession arrangement only reinforces that caution. From a DPRK perspective, spurning the Obama offer made good sense.

Keeping serious negotiations just out of reach may also be behind North Korea's sinking of the *Cheonan*, a South Korean naval vessel, in March 2010. China had mounted an effort to

facilitate resumption of the 6PT, and the sinking ensured that Seoul, Tokyo, and Washington would oppose new talks.

How Likely is Denuclearization?

Scholars cite three principal factors that encourage states to acquire and keep nuclear weapons: a sense of vulnerability vis-à-vis an external adversary, which forces within a regime dominate the policy debate, and how a state defines and fosters national identity. Sometimes these factors work to discourage the nuclear option (e.g. Japan) or encourage denuclearization (e.g. Libya).

For North Korea, these factors have worked in one, reinforcing direction. Under Kim Il-Sung, political and psychological factors worked together in favor of acquiring nuclear weapons. Those same reasons have led Kim Jong-il to keep them: he defined US policy as hostile, gave policy preference to the military, and played up the DPRK's heroic resistance to the United States.

More on the Succession

Because Kim chose not to groom a successor and is only now designating his third son, Kim Jung-eun, to follow him, one-man rule is unlikely to continue beyond his passing. The most likely outcome will be the emergence, in effect, of a Regency that will rule in the younger Kim's name until he is able to assume his father's powers (if ever). It will be composed of the leaders of the regime's key institutions: the military, the security services, the Korean Workers Party, and the government. They will defend the interests of their respective institutions, whatever the preferences of Kim and those around him.

The Regency may well continue Kim Jong-il's policies, including his nuclear policy, with no more than marginal change. The DPRK's perceived security vulnerability will remain. The national narrative has not completely lost its appeal. The domestic beneficiaries of the nuclear policy will remain entrenched. China will likely be willing to continue to subsidize the regime's economy to ensure its own domestic stability and preserve a buffer on the Peninsula.

Yet given the daunting challenges the regime faces, we cannot rule out the possibility that the DPRK's post-Kim leadership may choose to change Kim's approach to the security environment. Their goal would remain the same as before—regime survival—but their means could change.

This scenario provides the best possibility for deploying the offer first proposed by former Secretary of Defense William Perry in 1999 and reiterated in the Sept. 19, 2005 Joint Declaration (denuclearization, security guarantees, diplomatic normalization, economic assistance). In anticipation of this opportunity, the US, ROK, Japan, China and Russia ("The Five"), should be prepared to restate that

offer with great clarity. The chances of success may not be high, but the consequences for regional stability and nonproliferation will be great.

Playing to the Regency is far from a sure bet. It would have to admit, at least implicitly, that past policies failed. It would be hard to blame that failure on the Kim dynasty, which still retains an exalted status within the regime. And the bargain proposed in the 6PT still entails risks. But giving the new leadership reason to change is still worth doing.

Managing the Interim Phase; Looking to the Long Term

If “The Five” play for this mid-term opportunity, in the near-term they should continue to send the message to the DPRK leadership that continuing current policy will not end the present predicament. Sanctions should continue and be strengthened if North Korea engages in more provocations (China will not agree to tighten sanctions unless Pyongyang provokes). Benefits should be sufficient only to keep the regime afloat. Yet coercion should not be too hard and some incentives should be present. A purely tough coercive approach will only convince North Korea’s leaders that they face the threat of regime change. Relying on sanctions alone now is unlikely to change current DPRK policy, but they can help the Regency understand what kind of future is ahead of them if they don’t change.

The United States should not completely eschew diplomacy. After close consultation with South Korea and Japan, it should touch base with the DPRK periodically to gauge whether a policy change may occur, be prepared to return to the 6PT if there is reason to do so, if only to demonstrate to China that North Korea remains the obstacle to progress.

During the near-term, “The Five” will likely face North Korean provocations, like the sinking of the *Cheonan*. Provocations help Pyongyang keep the 6PT in suspension, boost the legitimacy of the regime domestically, and place the United States and the ROK on the defensive. In response, the US and others should be neither too soft nor too hard. Tolerating provocations will only invite more frequent and reckless probes, so Washington should be prepared to mobilize robust displays of force, conduct military exercises to improve capabilities, and build diplomatic coalitions. To respond too harshly runs the risk of creating an action-reaction spiral (something that China fears) and forgets the mid-term strategic objective: shaping how the next generation of leaders defines North Korea’s future.

There is, of course, the real possibility that the DPRK’s post-Kim leadership may prefer to maintain its crouch and tough it out. If that happens, “The Five” should return to the near-term mix of incentives and coercion with a tilt toward coercion. Having sought to shape the thinking of the post-Kim Jong-il leadership, they should move to fashion a long-term strategy for containing the dangers posed by a nuclear North Korea (both regional instability and proliferation).

Securing China’s Cooperation

Obviously, getting China to buy into this approach will not be easy. It has been hard enough to secure its commitment

to multilateral responses to North Korea’s missile tests, nuclear tests, and the sinking of the *Cheonan*.

Shaping Beijing’s cautious stance are memories of Korean War comradeship, the desire to preserve a buffer state on its border, a fear that external pressure on the DPRK may trigger collapse and produce a flood of refugees into Northeast China, and special institutional factors (the role of the International Department of the Chinese Communist Party).

Institutional factors aside, these reasons for Chinese policy are understandable but not compelling. There are ways to discourage migration from failed states. Seoul and Washington can provide Beijing with assurances about the future of US forces on the Peninsula. If China acknowledges that North Korea is the principal source of instability in Northeast Asia, nostalgia about the past should decline.

Again, the focus should be less on how Beijing calibrates its policy now but how The Five can work together to make the most of the post-Kim environment.

The Biggest Challenge

Finally, we must confront the reality that the political change that follows Kim Jong-il’s death may bring about prolonged internal division or collapse. In either scenario, the implications for North Korea’s neighbors and the United States would be serious. All would be concerned about the security of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons and fissile material. South Korea would see the opportunity of reunifying the Peninsula but is suspicious about China’s intentions. Addressing a humanitarian disaster amid collapse would be a challenge. For China, the loss of its buffer state would change the regional strategic equation.

Radical change in North Korea will affect the interests of other parties in different ways. Conflicts of interest are inevitable and can only be managed. The danger of conflict among them is not zero if circumstances convinced China, South Korea, and the US that some degree of intervention was necessary.

The only way to manage these conflicts of interests and avoid conflict is for Seoul, Washington, Beijing, and Tokyo to talk to each other. This should occur, certainly at a political level, on the need to work together and to reassure China on how the ROK and the United States view the future of the Korean Peninsula. But it should also occur at more operational levels (e.g., military commanders in the field) where the frictions will occur unless they are anticipated.

William Perry once said, “United States policy must, therefore, deal with the North Korean government as it is, not as we might wish it to be.” Odds are that despite our best efforts to convince the Regency to shift course, the DPRK will refuse to give up its nuclear weapons, so Washington should no longer make that the basis of its policy. A more compelling premise is that North Korea will be a destabilizing factor in Northeast Asia for some time to come.