



North Korea and Nuclear Weapons: The Sondheim Defense by Alan D. Romberg

In PacNet 6, Ralph Cossa offers some advice to ROK President-elect Roh Moo-hyun as he develops his approach to dealing with North Korea. In PacNet 6A, Alan Romberg urges Washington to develop realistic steps to get from "where we are to where we want to be," without paying North Korea to "stop doing what it shouldn't be doing." The authors share a common goal: to avoid an irretrievable crisis without rewarding North Korea's outrageous confrontational behavior.

In justifying its decision to restart its nuclear program at Yongbyon, North Korea has cited the U.S. refusal to negotiate or to abandon its "threatening" policies. This reminds one of the defense for miscreant behavior that lyricist Stephen Sondheim provided a gang member in *West Side Story*: "I'm depraved on account I'm deprived."

Whatever the logic, between Pyongyang's penchant for brinkmanship and Washington's for pressure tactics, we're heading for a train wreck. With reports that spent fuel may be en route to reprocessing into a half dozen weapons' worth of fissile material, the day of reckoning may be quickly approaching.

Thus far, the U.S. has chosen to deal with this situation by eschewing negotiations, seeking instead to engage the international community in pressure tactics. President Bush says America's purpose in dealing with "outlaw" regimes that seek weapons of mass destruction is "more than to follow a process - it is to achieve a result." Yet he appears ready to live with a growing North Korean nuclear weapons stockpile rather than try serious diplomacy. Out of fear that it will appear to be rewarding bad behavior, his administration shows no willingness to sit down at the table with the North to talk about anything other than meeting U.S. demands. Meanwhile, Pyongyang is apparently determined to gain a nuclear weapons capability, in part because it sees that as its only guarantee of survival. Unless given a sufficient reason not to, it will continue to march down that path.

Let's be clear. The North has behaved outrageously and the U.S. is right not to want, in appearance or reality, to pay North Korea to stop doing what it shouldn't be doing. Whether the North "admitted" to a program to create high-enriched uranium (HEU), as Washington says, or only said it has the "right" to have such a program, as Pyongyang insists, the point is that the North has overturned a series of international commitments and created a dangerous situation.

Nonetheless, the U.S. goal should be to move from where we are to where we want to be, and the history of dealings with the DPRK over the past decade and more casts grave doubt on the efficacy of a policy that says: "You go first, unilaterally. When you're done, give us a call."

Moreover, while the U.S. will surely seek to up the ante if the reports of imminent reprocessing prove true, if Washington has failed to even sit down with the North, international cooperation is highly questionable.

Pyongyang says the cure for the present standoff is bilateral talks with Washington that produce U.S. recognition of DPRK sovereignty, a Senate-ratified nonaggression treaty, and a promise not to obstruct North Korea's international economic relations. In that case, they say, they will satisfy all U.S. security concerns.

In response, the U.S. has said that, while it had been prepared to present a "bold vision" of a broad new relationship with North Korea, in light of the DPRK's egregious violations Washington will not negotiate on any agenda until the nuclear problem is fixed. And until it is fixed, the U.S. won't talk about anything other than how to fix it.

More likely to succeed - though success is hardly guaranteed - is an approach that at least demonstrates to the North that, not only is its nuclear program a path to disaster, but if it does what the international community rightly demands regarding closing down its nuclear program, it has much to gain in terms of its security and its political and economic relationships beyond a vague promise of a "bold vision." To make the case, the U.S. should share the contents of that vision, even while making clear that it can only act on it once the nuclear issue has been satisfactorily dealt with.

In the meantime, it is urgent to stop the spiral toward an irretrievable crisis. The two sides need to agree on interim assurances: the U.S. that it will not attack - and has "no hostile intent" toward - North Korea, while Pyongyang commits - verifiably - not to reprocess spent fuel. In the longer term, more formal, and more sweeping, arrangements are needed, with American assurances conditioned on verifiable DPRK commitments to forego weapons of mass destruction and dismantle existing facilities now.

We know what needs to be done; the issue is how to do it. Negotiations - or talks, or discussions, or whatever you want to call them - do not involve automatically accepting the other side's demands or making agreements that are not reasonable or sensible. But they are based on the notion that talking is not a reward, it is a necessary first step to a solution.

As the stronger power, the U.S. needs to reach back to the prescription offered by President John F. Kennedy over four decades ago. To would-be adversaries he said, "Let us begin anew, remembering on both sides that civility is not a sign of weakness, and sincerity is always subject to proof. Let us never negotiate out of fear. But let us never fear to negotiate." West Side Story, meet Camelot.

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