

# THE NUCLEAR IMPASSE ON THE KOREAN PENINSULA: THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE THEY STAY THE SAME

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The revelation that North Korea has been secretly enriching uranium for nuclear weapons in violation of its international commitments has thrown the Korean peninsula into crisis. The sunshine policy of South Korean President Kim Dae Jung has been undermined, but the Bush administration's hard-line expressed in the "axis of evil" speech has also come in for criticism. At the root of the current crisis is the failure of all sides to face up to the fundamental security issues. Hard-liners in the U.S. and the South should reconsider their desires for rapid regime change in the North in light of its catastrophic consequences. The interaction between reform in the North and easing of its security situation needs to be more clearly recognized. Analysis of policy options to reverse the North's nuclear programs shows that use of military force is much too costly and damaging to regional security. And that isolation and sanctions alone will not stop the North from acquiring nuclear weapons. In the long run, the way to get the North to truly abandon its nuclear programs is not to isolate it further or try to buy it off only with economic aid, but to establish security cooperation in which all sides will have their security concerns addressed.

## **The New Nuclear Crisis**

Not that long ago the Korean peninsula seemed on the verge of fundamental transformation. The dramatic first ever summit between South Korean President Kim Dae Jung and North Korean leader Kim Jong Il raised expectations that finally the two Koreas were on a path to reconciliation. The summit was the realization of a series of positive developments since the 1994 Agreed Framework. The Agreed Framework was negotiated in the first Korean nuclear crisis, when the North seemed on the verge of gaining nuclear weapons. The Agreed Framework promised to end North Korean development of nuclear weapons and regularize negotiations between North and South Korea in return for two new nuclear power plants that would be less suitable for weapons development and normalization of diplomatic relations between the U.S. and North Korea. In 1998 newly elected South Korean President Kim Dae Jung embarked a sustained “sunshine policy” designed to end half a century of hostility between North and South. Sunshine dovetailed well with the Clinton administration’s engagement policy, as outlined in the Perry Report. Although formal U.S.-North Korean diplomatic relations did not begin as envisioned in the Agreed Framework, some of America’s Cold War economic and political sanctions against the North were related and most of America’s key European allies did normalize relations with the North. Work on the KEDO project to provide alternative nuclear energy began, although the project quickly fell behind schedule. While there were setbacks, most importantly, the test firing of a North Korean medium range missile over Japan, hopes were high that a new era was dawning. A freeze on North Korean missile development was negotiated. The North-South summit was followed by an unprecedented visit of North Korea’s number two man Jo Ryong Mok to Washington to meet with President Clinton and a trip by U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright to Pyongyang.

But in the past two years the bloom has come off the rose. The newly elected Bush administration, suspicious of the North Korean regime and unhappy with the concessions of the Clinton engagement policy, suspended U.S. dialogue with the North while South-North talks have been off and on. Most of what was promised at the Pyongyang summit has not yet been implemented. A planned second summit in Seoul has not come off. The peninsula remains divided and highly militarized. Fears of conflict remain on both sides. North Korea is apprehensive about U.S. military superiority while the South and the U.S. are suspicious of the large conventional forces of the North. Angry rhetoric, which had been toned down, especially in the afterglow of the summit, has renewed. North Korea has accused the Bush administration of sabotaging relations while the Bush administration characterizes North Korea as part of its “axis of evil” and talks openly of regime change.

In October 2002, at the first high level visit of the Bush administration officials to Pyongyang, when confronted with hard evidence, North Korea admitted it has been pursuing a secret uranium enrichment program in a new effort to develop nuclear weapons. This shocking violation of the North Korea’s commitments under the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty, the 1992 Declaration on a nuclear free Korean peninsula, and the Agreed Framework, the centerpiece of the engagement and sunshine policies, put any U.S.-North Korean cooperation in severe jeopardy. In November a broadcast on official North Korean radio suggested that North Korea actually already possesses some nuclear bombs, although it was not stated whether they were made from plutonium extracted before the Agreed Framework or from the later uranium enrichment. Doubts were then raised about whether the seeming revelation was actually just a misstatement of the broadcaster, since this important statement was not attributed to any North Korean official.

### **Sunshine vs. Axis of Evil: Trilateral Coordination, Division of Labor, or Asymmetries of Interest?**

Events are moving quickly on the Korean peninsula. The Bush administration's response to these revelations was swift and unambiguous. All U.S. cooperation with the North has been severed until the uranium enrichment program is terminated. In addition, the United States has suspended oil shipments that it was providing as an alternative energy source under the Agreed Framework. U.S. demands for inspection of all of North Korea's nuclear facilities have intensified. The South Korean reaction has been more nuanced. While the Kim Dae Jung government has also called for the end of all North Korean nuclear weapons development, it has continued on-going talks with the North on inter-Korean issues. Japan, which was in the middle of normalization talks with the North when the revelations came, agreed to another round of those talks, but has made suspension of North Korean nuclear weapons development a precondition for diplomatic recognition.

By the time of publication, the immediate impasse over nuclear weapons may have broken or the situation may have worsened considerably. Nevertheless, it is worth examining the recent history of relations between North Korea, South Korea, the United States, and the other powers of Northeast Asia.

In recent years the U.S., South Korea, and Japan have attempted to harmonize their policies toward North Korea, holding regular trilateral coordination meetings. Yet in the past two years there has been growing distance between the Bush administration's hard-line and Kim Dae Jung's sunshine policy. While governments continue to call for greater policy coordination, neither is willing to change its basic approach to the North simply to achieve consensus. This difference became apparent once again in the new nuclear crisis. The Kim Dae Jung administration is keeping lines open to the North and trying to keep the KEDO

project alive, while the U.S. is calling for suspension of KEDO and currently rejects negotiations until the North verifiably abandons its nuclear weapons programs.

While many decry this lack of uniformity in policy, others have compared the differing U.S. and South Korean approaches as a kind of “good cop, bad cop” routine where a tough U.S. threatens severe punishment while a sympathetic South Korea elicits cooperation through dialogue promising benefits. Certainly, in the current crisis some division of labor can be useful. There is some merit in the U.S. position that the North should not be “paid off” for violating a solemn agreement, and therefore there is nothing to talk about until the North backs off its nuclear weapons programs. But the situation is too dangerous to rely simply on external pressure. Thus, if the South keeps open channels of communication, possible solutions can be explored. While the U.S. stands outside applying pressure, South Korea can serve as a messenger, a catalyst or even an honest broker in the search for equitable solutions to the immediate crisis. As long as the U.S., South Korea, and Japan keep to a uniform message that the North will have to abandon its nuclear weapons programs before progress on any other issues is possible, differences in how to best convey this message are tolerable, and perhaps even more effective in getting the message through.

However, the differences in the approaches of the Bush and Kim Dae Jung administrations reflect a deeper asymmetry of perceptions and interests. It is often commented upon that the U.S. sees Korea primarily in light of security issues, while South Korea is increasingly focused on the task of political reconciliation between the North and South.<sup>1</sup>

But at a deeper level there is a growing difference in U.S. and South Korean concerns about the North Korean regime.<sup>2</sup> The U.S., South

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1 John Kotch, “Korea’s Multinational Diplomacy and US-Korea Relations,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs* and Victor Cha, “Balance, Parallelism, and Asymmetry: United States-Korea Relations,” *Journal of East Asian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 2, February 2001.

Korea, and the other powers in Northeast Asia all agree that there must be fundamental change in the North Korean system. The differences lie in attitudes toward the method achieving that transition. South Korea, China, and Russia would all bear a heavy burden if the North Korean regime were to collapse precipitously, even if the danger of a second large-scale Korean War could be avoided. Not only would untold numbers of economic refugees come streaming across the borders, but conflict within the North between emerging factions could further devastate its failing economic infrastructure and even spark cross-border military conflict or require outside military intervention. The collapse of the North Korean regime is a nightmare scenario as seen from Seoul, Beijing, and Moscow.

But the U.S. would be geographically insulated from these heavy burdens. Thus it is relatively easy for hard-liners in the U.S. to call for rapid regime change in the North.

In addition, the U.S. is more unremittingly hostile to the regime in the North on ideological grounds because it clings to communism in the post-communist era, making regime change in the North a matter of doctrine—not just to the hard-liners in the Bush administration—but many others in Washington.

Political differences between the U.S. and the South may be moderated if, as expected, a conservative regains the Korean presidency in the December 2002 elections. But the fundamental gap between the South Korean and U.S. perceptions on engaging the North runs deeper than personalities, and therefore is unlikely to completely disappear.

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2 Young-Ho Park, "U.S.-North Korea Relations and ROK-U.S. Policy Cooperation," *Korea and World Affairs*, vol. xxvi, no. 1, Spring 2002.

### **The Bush Administration Hard-line: Hawk Engagement or Malign Neglect?**

Since it took office, the Bush administration has been sending conflicting signals about what it is trying to achieve in its policy toward North Korea. Is it deliberately trying to engineer a collapse of the regime in the Pyongyang or is it simply holding out for a better deal, with more concessions and greater reform? Various commentators have characterized the Bush hard-line as regime change, demand for reciprocity, greater reliance on sticks rather than carrots, return to containment, isolation, and/or punishment, benign neglect, or even hawk engagement.<sup>3</sup> Bush administration rhetoric has varied considerably, from the president's axis of evil depiction in the post 9/11 State of the Union to reassurances that the U.S will not invade the North during his visit to Seoul in February 2002.

Thus, those who try to intuit a Bush strategy from its various statements are on shaky ground. After all, since the attack on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the attention of the administration has been closely focused on the Islamic world—on its responses to terrorism, the war in Afghanistan, and the showdown with Iraq—diverting attention from Korea and Northeast Asia. It is probably more accurate to see the Bush administration's policies as stemming from a reflexive set of attitudes rather than a carefully thought-out strategy.

The Bush administration clearly carries a hostile attitude toward the Kim Jong Il government. Yet at least until now it has not been inclined to consider direct military action against North Korea, given South

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3 Victor Cha, "Korea's Place in the Axis," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2002; Jongchul Park, "Inter-Korean Relations after the Summit Meeting," *Korea and World Affairs*, Summer 2001; Richard Armitage, "A Comprehensive Approach to North Korea," available at <http://www.kimsoft.com/1997/armitag.htm>; Yong-Sun Song, "Prospects of North Korea's Conventional Arms Control," *Korea and World Affairs*, Summer 2002.

Korean opposition and the huge geostrategic implications of military action in the backyard of China, Russia, and Japan. Perhaps the best characterization of the Bush policy toward North Korea is “malign neglect,” a hostile attitude but an inability to act, a wish for regime change without a systematic plan for bringing it about.

The Bush doctrine of pre-emption of the development of weapons of mass destruction by so-called rogue regimes raises the possibility of direct military pressure on North Korea similar to that being brought on Iraq. The axis of evil speech certainly implies such an analogy. North Korea did sign the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty which gives the International Atomic Energy Commission the right to inspect North Korean nuclear facilities, so if the UN inspections program in Iraq is a success, it will increase pressure for the North to agree to some kind of inspections.

However, even the Bush administration admits there are important differences in the two cases. North Korea has not recently attacked its neighbors as Iraq has done twice in the past two decades. North Korea is located between other major powers—Japan, China, and Russia—none of which have the same elemental geostrategic interests in Iraq. While Northeast Asian powers share a basic interest in a nuclear free Korea, there is no UN resolution stating an international consensus and validating international action against North Korea. Nor is there likely to be such UN action anytime soon, since both China and Russia are more likely to exercise their Security Council veto power on UN action on the Korean peninsula.

The policy of malign neglect toward North Korea has largely flowed from the Bush administration’s intense focus on the Islamic world. Tied down with on-going pacification in Afghanistan, global operations against Al Qaeda, the military build-up in the Persian Gulf, and forging a broad global coalition for disarming and perhaps acting militarily against Iraq, the last thing the Bush administration wants right now is a second theater of conflict in Northeast Asia. One of the



unintended side-effects of Bush's hard-line and malign neglect against North Korea has been promotion of North-South dialogue, as the North increasingly finds the South its most accommodating partner. Relations between the two Koreas, which ultimately will determine the fate of the Korean peninsula, have moved forward because the North has been stymied in its attempts to engage Washington.

### **The Unraveling of the Agreed Framework: Failure of Sunshine, Failure of the Hard-line, or Failure to Face Security Issues?**

Events in Northeast Asia have not stood still while the Bush administration remains focused on the Islamic world and continues to search for a consistent strategy toward North Korea. The Agreed Framework, which has been the centerpiece of progress on security issues and nuclear non-proliferation on the Korean peninsula since 1994, has been unraveling for some time. The two light water nuclear power plants promised to North Korea as alternative energy sources by KEDO are years behind schedule, with each side blaming the other for delays. Not only has North Korea been enriching uranium in violation of its non-proliferation commitments, but it has also never accounted for small amounts of plutonium that may have been diverted for weapons production, and the agreed international inspections regime has not materialized. From the North Korean perspective, the complete end of U.S. economic sanctions and the normalization of U.S.-North Korean relations that was promised have not been realized.

Yet it would be a mistake to write off the Agreed Framework as a complete failure.<sup>4</sup> It has delayed the nuclearization of the Korean peninsula. It has indirectly contributed to normalization in North Korea's relations with major European nations. It has facilitated a

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4 Daryl Kimball, Robert Gallucci, Marc Vogelaar, and Leon Sigal, "Progress and Challenges in Denuclearizing North Korea," *Arms Control Today*, May 2002.

partial opening of the North to the outside world.

But the Agreed Framework is increasingly obsolete. Even if the current impasse on North Korean nuclear weapons development could be resolved, more needs to be done than simply setting more realistic targets for completion of the KEDO project. A new framework for U.S., North Korean, and South Korean security relations is increasingly necessary.

However, before the problem of a new framework can be effectively addressed, there needs to be a post-mortem on the old Agreed Framework. Was the failure to fully implement the Agreed Framework the failure of the sunshine/engagement policy in conceding too much and not getting enough in return or the failure of the American hard-line to offer sufficient economic incentives to the North?

The hard-liners in the U.S. argue that sunshine/engagement has not worked because, despite the incentives, North Korea has not abandoned its pursuit of nuclear weapons. From their point of view, the U.S. and South Korea have been “giving without getting,” granting major economic aid and trade and providing North Korea with crucial energy resources, concessions that have not been reciprocated. To hard-liners, the recently revealed violations simply demonstrate once again that the North cannot be trusted and that any concessions will be taken as a sign of weakness.

Yet the hard-liners in the North make a similar argument. From their point of view, the North has made all the important concessions, trading away their two hard bargaining chips, nuclear weapons and missile capabilities, yet not materially improving their basic security position. The North still remains vulnerable to superior U.S. forces, and it has not even been able to extract a non-aggression pact from the U.S. in return, much less normalization of relations. The Bush administration’s suspension of talks with the North, its statements about an axis of evil, its threats to use military force to pre-empt rogue regimes, and speculation in Washington about collapse scenarios have only

confirmed fears of hard-liners in Pyongyang that the U.S. is more intent on eliminating the North Korean regime than working together with it.

In one sense the hard-liners on both sides are right about the outcome of nearly a decade of negotiations. Neither the North nor the U.S.-South Korean alliance has been able to significantly improve its security position despite nearly a decade of negotiations under the Agreed Framework.<sup>5</sup> That is the crux of the problem.

A chilling comparison can be drawn to the Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, the Oslo peace process. For nearly a decade the Palestinians and Israelis engaged in a long-term peace process, starting with routine economic and social matters then moving on to institutionalizing political relations, with the final goal of solving the security problem through the creation of a Palestinian state. Small, manageable issues were taken up first with the hope that building confidence and mutual respect that could eventually create a new climate in which the fundamental security issues could ultimately be resolved. There were ups and downs in the peace process, but many short-term, incremental steps were successfully undertaken.

Yet when Palestinian and Israeli leaders met in Washington at the end of the Clinton administration to discuss the outlines of a final security settlement, the process broke down. It was clear that the Palestinians expected the endgame to be a truly independent state, while Israel was unwilling to give up its military operations in the West Bank and political control of the settlements it had built on crucial locations there. All the step-by-step confidence building measures had not paved the way for a final settlement because the parties did not share a common vision for the final stage. By avoiding the crucial security issues, the "peace process" had not brought real peace, and today the bloodshed is worse than it was before the peace process began.

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5 Selig Harrison, *Korean Endgame*, Princeton University Press, 2002.

The analogy between the Palestinian-Israeli and the U.S.-South Korea-North Korea peace process is far from perfect. And certainly in both the Middle East and in Korea, the peace process had to begin with smaller, manageable tasks on which there were at least some possibility of reaching agreement and building confidence to tackle the more intractable problems. It is understandable that those caught up in the Herculean task of getting any serious negotiations moving forward at all chose to defer the thornier security issues. Serious discussion of security problems on the Korean peninsula raises vital questions about the role of American forces, the nature of the North Korean regime based on permanent total military mobilization, and on the dependency of the South on the U.S. There is no simple road map that indicates a straight path to a demilitarized Korean peninsula.

But one lesson seems clear from the Palestinian-Israeli experience—difficult security problems cannot be resolved simply by incremental approaches to lesser economic and political issues.

### **Back to Basics: Soft Landing or Regime Change?**

So what should the U.S. and South Korea be seeking in relations with the North? What approach will truly meet the essential security requirements on the Korean peninsula? To answer these questions, we must return to the fundamental question of what endgame the U.S. and the South should be seeking.

There are really only four conceivable long-range outcomes on the Korean peninsula: 1) continued hostile division, 2) reunification through war, 3) reunification through regime collapse in the North and absorption of the North by the South, and 4) negotiated transition to a loose confederation of the two Koreas.

Of course war is the least desirable and least likely outcome, but the ever-looming possibility of war must inform consideration of all the

other scenarios. No party on the Korean peninsula wants war, but war could be the unintended consequence of escalation of tensions and/or the badly managed or imminent collapse of the regime in the North.

Continued hostile division of the Korean peninsula is also undesirable, although more likely. The North Korean people suffer greatly under a regime that can neither feed its own people nor truly open up and reform its economic and political systems while under such a pressing external threat. Nor should the growing frustration of the people in the South with the plight of their northern cousins juxtaposed with the tantalizing promises of reconciliation be underestimated. But even more important, the hostile division of the peninsula is not stable. At any time war and/or the chaotic collapse of the North is possible. Even if the regime in the North were to continue to muddle through, in the absence of a negotiated peace regime, the security situation will only get worse, as the current nuclear crisis demonstrates. If the North acquires nuclear weapons, the South and possibly Japan could well follow.

Collapse of the regime in the North and absorption by the South, as West Germany absorbed East Germany, is appealing to ideological conservatives in the U.S. and the South, but ultimately much too dangerous and painful. At a minimum collapse of the regime in the North would result in millions of economic refugees fleeing not only south, but also north into China and Russia. Its already antiquated economic infrastructure would be further degraded. A succession struggle between different factions in the North could be bloody and protracted, and could well draw the South and possibly other regional powers into a quagmire. The terrible suffering of the North Koreans would only be intensified. And the possibility cannot be discounted that in the face of imminent collapse, either the regime itself, or hard-line factions, might launch a military conflict with the South.

Thus, the only desirable outcome would be a negotiated transition to a reformed regime in the North, a new relationship between the

North and South, and a stable security architecture on the peninsula and in the region generally. The regime in the North is in fact as dangerous and as flawed as the Bush administration says. But since it is neither wise nor feasible to bring the regime down, it has to be dealt with and eventually neutralized exactly because it is so dangerous and so flawed. Negotiation with the North has been the agreed upon policy of the U.S., South Korea, and Japan. And key elements of both reform and a stable security regime have been acknowledged by the North, however grudgingly.

The North needs to truly accept that more substantial reform must come. But hard-liners in the U.S. and the South must also accept that a gradual reform of the North is preferable to sudden regime change and absorption by the South. Once collapse-absorption is recognized as neither desirable nor feasible, the reform dilemma the North faces also becomes salient. Hard-liners in the U.S. and the South are quick to point out that years of engagement have produced little fundamental change in the basic North Korean system. Certainly the regime in the North is still light years from a liberal, capitalist system, although the degree to which the North is willing to embark on a path that will force it to jettison its long-time goals of communizing the South is often underestimated. If Mao's China and the Vietnamese who fought for generations against the U.S. and the West can reform and open up, so can the North. The more the North opens up to the South and the global capitalist economy, the more the regime in the North will be changed. Realists in the North recognize U.S. military superiority and realize that the only way to reduce the U.S. threat to the North is to reduce the Northern threat to the South. The revolutionary slogans still spouted from hard-liners in the North will eventually be tempered and finally abandoned if the North becomes more enmeshed with the South and the global system. The experience not only in Russia and Eastern Europe, but also in China and Vietnam shows that seemingly highly ideological communist party leaders can be enticed to turn

themselves into state capitalists if they themselves can profit from the transition.

But the U.S. and the South should realize the tightrope the North Korean regime is walking. If it leans too far toward maintaining the existing system, the North will fall into oblivion. But if it leans too far toward rapid reform, the regime could quickly become as irrelevant as Gorbachev became in the Soviet Union, with the additional danger that prominent members could end up on trial for their lives like leaders of the former Yugoslavia. As Moon and Kim put it,

For Pyongyang, the Soviet failure must be a negative path model that should be avoided at any price. The reason North Korea has yet to introduce and implement serious economic reforms is not because it doesn't want to change, but rather because its leadership is concerned about reforms slipping out of its control.<sup>6</sup>

While some hard-liners in the U.S. so ardently hope for such a day that they would pay any cost, they should be more careful what they wish for. Gradual reform and transition is a much less catastrophic method to defuse the ticking time bomb on the Korean peninsula.

The goals of reform, reconciliation, and a peace regime are tightly interrelated. Some reform in the North is necessary to assure the United States and South Korea that things have changed and the historic North Korean goal of reunification through communization has been abandoned. But North Korean reforms are likely to remain only incremental until the regime can be assured of its security and survival. The issues of reform and security are both/and, not either/or. But difficult questions remain about how to get from here to there.

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6 Chung-In Moon and Tae-Hwan Kim, "Sustaining Inter-Korean Reconciliation: North-South Korea Cooperation," *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, vol. xv, no. 2, Fall/Winter 2001.

### **Sequence and Transition: Which Comes First, the Chicken or the Egg?**

Most of the major players in the region share the goal of moving the Korean peninsula from hostile division to reconciliation, reform, and a peace regime. The obstacles lay in the sequence of the transition. The sunshine policy of the South has been based on deferring difficult security issues until confidence can be built up through successful negotiations over less contentious economic and social issues.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, hard-liners in the Bush administration want regime change in the North which they seem to assume will automatically solve the security issues.

Despite their obvious differences, both approaches rely primarily on economic incentives to leverage fundamental security concessions by the North. The South has been relying primarily on economic carrots to entice the North. The hard-liners in the Bush administration look to turn the withholding of existing carrots, such as heavy oil shipments and KEDO funding, into an effective stick to punish misbehavior by the North and perhaps even to starve the North into submission.

Neither approach has yet born the desired fruits, nor are they likely to do so. Surrender of the North Korean regime cannot be bought by the richer South or even the U.S. Despite the improvement in relations between the North and South over recent years, the current unraveling of the Agreed Framework demonstrates that measures primarily for confidence building must soon be supplemented by hard choices on basic security issues if a process of transition is to be sustained.

Reform of the North and easing of security tensions must go hand-in-hand. U.S. and South Korean concerns about the authenticity of changes in the North must be assuaged if there is to be real movement on security issues. But the regime in the North cannot really relax its

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7 Chung-In Moon, "The Kim Dae-Jung Government and Changes in Inter-Korean Relations," *Korea and World Affairs*, vol. xxv, no.4, Winter 2001.



grip until it can be assured that it is not signing its own death warrant. Progress on reform is necessary for a true peace regime to emerge, but progress on security issues is also necessary before real reform can take hold.

Sequence is also at the heart of the current impasse over nuclear weapons. The U.S. demands a verifiable end to all North Korean nuclear weapons programs as a precondition to negotiation on any other issues. North Korea is only willing to talk about an end its uranium enrichment program and inspections of its weapons programs in the context of a package deal that ensures basic security and survival of the North Korean regime. Since the nuclear revelations the North has focused on demands for a non-aggression treaty as part of such a package deal.

This apparent deadlock is not insoluble. For example, concession from each side might be announced simultaneously without open admission that a deal had been struck. But that fig leaf might not be enough for hard-liners in the U.S.

The handling of the Cuban missile crisis provides one method of sequencing that might be appropriate to the current Korean nuclear crisis. When the Kennedy administration demanded that the Soviet missiles under construction in Cuba be withdrawn immediately, Khrushchev responded by offering to do so if Kennedy withdrew U.S. missiles recently placed in Turkey. At first Kennedy refused to trade the missiles in Turkey for the missiles in Cuba. However, as tensions mounted, Kennedy offered a secret, sequenced deal. If the missiles were withdrawn from Cuba immediately, the U.S. would withdraw its missiles from Turkey six months later. The deal was conditioned on the Soviet Union never admitting publicly that such a deal had been made.

Such a finely nuanced deal between the U.S. and North Korea is unlikely. But a similar kind of sequencing might be possible. If North Korea were to back down on its nuclear weapons programs, the U.S. might secretly promise to address key North Korean security concerns

at a date certain. To assure North Korean suspicions that this promise might go the way of former promises to normalize relations, the beginning of any serious inspection regime might be made contingent on the U.S. following through on any secret commitments.

### **The Way out of the Current Impasse: Isolation and Punishment or Hard Bargaining?**

Robert Gallucci, the lead U.S. negotiator of the Agreed Framework, has made the argument that there are only three basic ways of dealing with North Korea—the use of military force, the use of strong sanctions to isolate and punish the North, or negotiations.<sup>8</sup> Although these remarks were made prior to the current nuclear crisis, they still ring true today.

Gallucci further argued that the use of military force was much too dangerous. Even a so-called “surgical” strike on the North’s nuclear facilities would likely trigger a larger conflict, if not all-out war. Not only could the Korean peninsula be devastated, but U.S. relations with China, Russia, and even Japan would be severely and adversely affected.

Gallucci also argued that sanctions alone would neither topple the North Korean regime nor stop North Korean nuclear development. Too many in Washington have been waiting for the regime in the North to have the good sense and manners to just disappear like the Soviets and their client states. But the fact is not only the North, but all of the communist regimes in Asia are still in place. The Chinese,

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8 Robert Gallucci, “The Bush Administration’s Policy towards Northeast Asia and North Korea,” *The Korean Peninsula after the Summit*, Institute for Far Eastern Studies Conference, Seoul, Korea, May 23-24, 2002. See also “Bush’s Deferral of Missile Negotiations with North Korea: A Missed Opportunity,” *Arms Control Today*, April 2001.

Vietnamese, and North Korean communist governments were established by indigenous revolutions rather than imposed by the Soviet Red Army, and none has come close to falling. The North Korean people are suffering terribly, but terrible suffering alone has never been enough to bring down governments.

According to Gallucci, sanctions alone will not deter the North Korean regime from pursuing nuclear weapons. Despite strict sanctions, the North was well on its way to acquiring nuclear weapons before the Agreed Framework was negotiated. The expectation of improved relations with the U.S. and the promise of alternative energy sources delayed the North Korean nuclear program. But in the absence of restraints brought on by international agreements, the North will certainly attain nuclear weapons. Indeed, they may have already done so.

Gallucci concluded that the only effective means to stop North Korean nuclear development was through negotiations. Gallucci's remarks were made before the revelation of North Korea's uranium enrichment program. If the North continues down this road, it is difficult to see how the U.S. and other powers could reward the North's violation of solemn agreements by another pay-off for abandoning its obligations. But at least officially, the North Koreans remain eager to return to the negotiating table if a way can be found to allow them to do so.

It is important to distinguish isolation and punishment as a tactic until North Korea backs off from its provocative behavior versus isolation and punishment as an overall strategy for bringing about reform. A soft landing should be the goal. The stick of isolation may be necessary at times, but North Korean behavior will not be changed by sticks alone.

A prerequisite for success at reopening serious talks will be getting the message across that North Korea cannot have nuclear weapons and good relations with the U.S. or the South at the same time. But another

prerequisite of success is eventually assuring the North that it is not a target of the Bush administration, that any changes in the North will be gradual and orderly, and that as long as serious negotiations are in progress, military force will not be used.

Whether the North will see the light is unknowable given its opaque nature.<sup>9</sup> The North Koreans clearly have a different world-view and the difference in ideological assumptions make it difficult for outsiders to understand it. Hard-liners in the U.S. and the South argue the real nature of the regime in North has not changed, that Pyongyang only makes surface concessions and reforms in order to get large-scale aid and major concessions.<sup>10</sup> Others see the North as willing to deal and over time willing to change, pointing to the concessions the North has already made on their key strategic assets, nuclear weapons and missiles, improvement of inter-Korean relations, and the economic reforms the North has already undertaken.<sup>11</sup> Hard-liners see North Korean negotiating tactics as either irrational or dangerous brinkmanship or both. However Leon Sigal, author of the most comprehensive study of the Agreed Framework negotiations, argues the North Koreans actually practice a quite rational form of “tit for tat,” matching U.S. bluster with bluster of their own but making concessions when the U.S. is also willing to make concessions.<sup>12</sup> Despite the apparently monolithic ideology of Kim Il Sung-ism, different North Korean actors probably

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9 Kongdan Oh and Ralph Hassig, “Guessing Right and Guessing Wrong about Engagement,” *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, vol. xv, no. 1, 2001.

10 Nicholas Eberstadt, “If North Korea were Really “Reforming,” How Could We Tell?,” *Korea and World Affairs*, Spring 2002 and Suk-Ryul Yu, “Changing Environment and Outlook for Inter-Korean Relations,” *Korean Observations on Foreign Relations*, vol. 4, no. 1, June 2002.

11 Moon, *op.cit* and Kimball, Gallucci, Vogelaar, and Sigal, *op. cit*.

12 Leon Sigal, “Bush Administration’s Policy toward North Korea,” *The Bush Administration’s Policy toward North Korea*, Institute for Far Eastern Studies and Georgetown University conference, October 24, 2001. See also Leon Sigal, *Disarming Strangers*, Princeton University Press, 1998.

have different intentions. More importantly, any actor's intentions can change over time based on a learning process and a changing environment. If Mao's China and Ho Chi Min's Vietnam can change, given time and a new environment, so can North Korea.

On the other side, there is hope that the Bush administration will eventually adopt a more flexible stance if the current impasse can be broken. In the case of Iraq, hard-liners wanted immediate military action, but international pressure moved the Bush administration to work through the United Nations. Hard-line Republican presidents have changed their positions before. The confirmed anti-communist Nixon went to Beijing to toast with Mao Zedong, and then to Moscow to sign the first nuclear arms control treaty. Ronald Reagan revived the Cold War and denounced the "evil empire," but then became buddy-buddy with Gorbachev. The attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center have hardened the Bush administration's view of the world, but the U.S. is still capable of learning and changing its policies.

However, the Bush administration currently is unable or unwilling to take a proactive stance, so by default the primary duty for moving things forward at this time has fallen to the South. Exactly because the South Koreans have a greater stake in avoiding either military conflict or chaotic collapse of the North, they are going to have to keep dialogue alive. The South Koreans can serve as messenger, not only to the North on why it must abandon its nuclear ambitions, but also to Washington, that the U.S. must be ready to reopen serious dialogue if the North complies. Other outside powers such as China, Russia, and Japan can play a similar role in both pressuring the North and persuading Washington to eventually respond to any North Korean concessions on the nuclear issue with a renewed commitment to taking up North Korea's security concerns.<sup>13</sup>

Hopefully, the current position of the Bush administration that a

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13 Mel Gurtov, "Common Security in North Korea," *Asian Survey*, vol. xii, no. 3, May/June 2002.

strong inspections and verification regime must be in place before it makes any security concessions is a negotiating stance.<sup>14</sup> It is hard to imagine North Korea allowing outside weapons inspectors to move freely around its territory until the basic survival of the North Korean regime is assured, although less intrusive methods might be tolerated if broader talks were reopened. Success of an inspections regime in Iraq would put pressure on the North to allow similar inspections. But given the greater geo-strategic stakes in Northeast Asia, the U.S. is much less likely to be able to get China and Russia to agree to impose a coercive inspections regime on North Korea.

The fact is that both sides desperately want something from the other. The U.S. wants to end the North Korean nuclear weapons programs and to reduce North Korea's conventional forces. The North Koreans want an end to the threat to their regime posed by the superior U.S. forces combined with the seemingly hostile intent of the current administration. There are in fact quite important issues to discuss if the current crisis can be defused.

### **If Dialogue Can Be Resumed: What Next?**

Even assuming the current crisis can be defused and negotiations resumed, the path forward on security and an eventual peace regime is not clear. There are crucial issues about how to sequence military redeployments and demilitarization of the Korean peninsula.<sup>15</sup> If the Bush administration wants to conclusively end the North's nuclear weapons

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14 Hak-Soon Paik, "Continuity or Change? The New U.S. Policy toward North Korea," *East Asian Review*, vol. 13, no. 2, Summer 2001.

15 Yong-Sup Han, Paul Davis, and Richard Darilek, "Time for Conventional Arms Control on the Korean Peninsula," *Arms Control Today*, December 2000 and Joo-Suk Seo, "Prospects of Inter-Korean Military Relations and Peace Regime," *Korean Observations on Foreign Relations*, vol. 4, no. 1, June 2002.

programs and to begin redeployment and reduction of the North's conventional forces, and to verify these measures through intrusive inspections, in return it will eventually have to just as conclusively demonstrate its harbors no hostile intent toward the North Korean regime and to take up the deployment and role of U.S. forces in Korea.<sup>16</sup> This means abandoning not only the threat of the use of military force against the North, but also giving up hopes for rapid regime change in the North in favor of a gradual transition process.

The hard-liners in the Bush administration are reluctant to give up the option of using force against the North. But thoughtful analysis shows that the military option is an empty threat. The danger of escalation into a second Korean War with massive casualties and destruction in the South as well as the North is not the only problem with military action. Unlike in the case of Iraq, other major powers in the region, particularly China and Russia, would never agree to support such action. Unilateral U.S. military action would split public opinion in the South, leading not just radicals but many mainstream political forces to press for the immediate withdrawal of American forces. It would almost certainly chill relations with China, perhaps triggering a new cold war in East Asia. Japan would probably follow the U.S. lead at first, but serious new anti-U.S. sentiment would almost certainly surface there too. Even the gains of destroying North Korean nuclear capabilities or bringing down the North Korean regime by force would not justify such costs.

So what does keeping the military threat alive actually accomplish? It does scare the hell out of the North. Reinforcing North Korean paranoia about the outside world and their worst fears about U.S. intentions might at times leverage certain concessions. But in the long run it actually makes it more difficult to for the North to make security concessions or relax its grip on home front.

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16 Harrison, *op. cit.*

American policymakers need to ask themselves, what would the U.S. lose by giving up the empty threat of military force compared to what could be gained if it did. Victor Cha argues in his provocative article on “hawk engagement” that the best strategy for hard-liners who want to effectively isolate North Korea would be to call its bluff. Only if the U.S. is willing to seriously engage and bargain with the North on any and all issues could it conclusively demonstrate North Korea’s unchanged intentions to the South and other regional powers.<sup>17</sup> Cha seems to think that North Korea would fail the test of authenticity of its motives, and that then and only then an effective international coalition to successfully isolate the North could be created and maintained. The architects of the Agreed Framework and the sunshine policy would argue that North Korea would likely pass such a test and substantial new progress could be made. But so far the Bush administration has been unwilling to put the North to such a test.

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17 Cha, “Korea’s Place in the Axis,” *op. cit.*